

Transcript of "A Smarter U" Season 2, Episode 1.

- Justin Cummings: Welcome to A Smarter U, a University of Lynchburg podcast. I'm Justin Cummings and today I'm joined by Natalie Deacon, assistant coach for the women's soccer team at University of Lynchburg.
- Natalie Deacon: Hi Justin. Thanks for having me here.
- Justin Cummings: And Kathrine Switzer, the first woman to register and run the Boston Marathon.
- Kathrine Switzer: Hi Justin. Great to be here.
- Justin Cummings: So today, the reason we're all here, Catherine Switzer will be the undergraduate commencement speaker at University of Lynchburg in 2019 and she was kind enough to come by and sit down and talk to us a bit about women's sports today, her history, the way that sports have changed in the past 50 years and what, it's like being a runner in a sport that didn't exactly want her to be a runner at the time. So we're going to get right into that. So go ahead Catherine, start at the beginning. What got you interested in sports generally and then specifically running?
- Kathrine Switzer: Well, you know, it's really interesting. My Dad, when I was 12 years old, told me I did not want to be a high school cheerleader, which was the nearest thing to teenage nirvana in those days, because life was to participate, not to spectate. He said cheerleaders cheer for other people. You want people to cheer for you and you are lucky enough to have in your high school (I was only 12, okay?) in your high school, a field hockey team. He said, I don't know what field hockey is, but I know they run and you should go out and run and make that team. And I said, well Dad, I've never played that sport before. And he said, "Look, all you have to do is run a mile a day and you'd be one of the best players. I know it." My father was extremely motivational, and, actually, he was right.
- Kathrine Switzer: I did make the team. But the thing is, I really struggled and ran this mile every single day when I was only 12. And it gave me such a sense of empowerment and power and magic that I've never stopped. I've been running for over 60 years now and it's, it's the thing that gives me everything. But anyway, that's how it began. I love to tell the story. I'm sorry, I'm going on here a little bit, but I love to tell the story because I love everybody saying, you know, just how important giving a kid an opportunity and a sense of encouragement is. It's everything.
- Justin Cummings: Absolutely. While we're on the topic of introductions to the sport, Natalie, how did you get into sports generally and then running specifically?
- Natalie Deacon: Yeah, so sports have always been a huge part of my life. I grew up, my best friends were a bunch of boys on my street and just had an awesome experience, loving sports from a young age.

Natalie Deacon: In high school. I competed in track and field and soccer. I had opportunities to do both in college and ended up choosing soccer. I just love the team aspect and all of that. And so I had the opportunity to play soccer here at Lynchburg for four years, was part of a national championship team in 2014, and as I was heading into my senior year, I knew that I was really going to struggle when soccer was over. And so I approached the distance coach here, Coach Reed, and I said, "Coach, when I'm done with soccer at the end of fall, will you let me run?" And thankfully he said, "Absolutely Nat, you know, we'd love for you to help us build our culture a little. We've only been here for two years. Would love for you to be a part of it." And so sure enough, right when I was done playing soccer, I took a week off and then I joined the track and field team and got to participate for two years.

Justin Cummings: Nice. So even if you can answer this question, this is a little bit broader about running before we kind of get to specific instances. So Kathrine, you talked about running to prepare for field hockey, Talk to me about how running is often seen as both its own sport, but then also prep for other sports and kind of that dichotomy that no other sport really has in that regard.

Kathrine Switzer: Well, I didn't have any opportunity to run for a sport because my objective was that field hockey team. And I loved what Natalie said about the team thing because suddenly I was a part of a team and we were working together in high school and we really wanted to win. Some of us were pretty klutzy and others were pretty good. But I was really one of the best players, not because I was skilled, but because I never got tired and I could outrun everybody. I loved being competitive and I loved also the fact that I could learn skills while I was running. So I got better at the skills and played for a full four years and, and then, you know, translate that into also basketball. And in the spring I didn't like softball, so I just ran all through the spring. But it was the men who ran and I was fascinated with track and field and I would watch it on television and stuff, but it never quite occurred to me that I could also run. It was because I never saw women running. I mean, I saw Wilma Rudolph in the 1960 Olympics running the hundred meters and the 200 meters, but that didn't relate to me. I didn't have any speed. I couldn't outrun anybody in the shorter distances. But I could outrun everybody if it was an hour-long hockey game.

Justin Cummings: Right. So talk to me about the transition to college then, kind of taking those sports in to college because that's when you really switched to running as well, correct?

Kathrine Switzer: Yes, but it was not at Lynchburg at first. I went to Lynchburg College for two years and then transferred to Syracuse University. I'll tell you why in a minute. But when I came to Lynchburg, the field hockey team was one of the motivating factors because in Virginia at that time, now we're talking 1964, there were no coed institutions in the state of Virginia except for Lynchburg. And my dad didn't want me to go to a girls-only school. And the big universities like University of Virginia were men only. And nobody seemed to question this. I thought that was all pretty strange. But anyway, Lynchburg was the only coed institution. So, you

know, we argued about it. I didn't want to really go to Lynchburg. I wanted to go someplace like University of Michigan. And my dad said, well, I'm paying for it.

So you know you will go here for two years and then we'll talk about it. But when I got to Lynchburg I loved it and began playing on the field hockey team. It wasn't as competitive actually as my high school team. Some women were, really, really good, but others were really kind of playing at it. So it was an interesting kind of time for me and I used running a lot after practice and between practices all the time to build up my distance and also to feel that I was keeping myself in better shape. And then I played lacrosse, which I loved and I also played basketball here too. I often wonder, however, this is something, and I still dream about this at my age 72, is I wondered if hockey had been an Olympic sport, if I would have aspired higher.

And what happened at Lynchburg was really amazing is that between basketball and lacrosse seasons, I was out running and it was a very, very rainy day. And the track coach was out on the track. I normally never ran on the track and I just usually ran through the woods in the streets, but it was a very rainy day. And so I ran on the track that day and the coach was there alone because the men hadn't showed up for practice. And so he was timing me and he came over to me and he said, "Can you run a mile?" And I said I could run three miles. And he said, "Well, look, you know, we don't have enough milers for the track meet this weekend. If you could just run for us, you'd pick up the points." And I said, "Well, I'll probably finish last."

And he said, "Sure, you probably will finish last." And I said, "Well, you know, if I can help the team out where I'm going, I don't mind finishing last, I'll get the points." It really created a huge sensation when this girl showed up for the track meet that weekend. In fact, they had more people turn out for that track meet than they even had for soccer game. It became a really big avalanche of PR. Also one of my hockey teammates, her name was Martha Newell, was asked to run the — I ran the mile, she ran the 800. I was really glad that she was along, cause we were breaking barriers and it was really great. We were nervous about the guys, how they would react, but they were all really good. So I don't know if coach had had a word with them or not, but Aubrey Moon was the guy who said, "Can you run a mile?" and invited us to give it a shot and made all the difference. Anyway, as I said, the publicity was enormous. And, um, the guys on the team actually loved having all the TV cameras there and the whole student body turn out because everybody only turned out for soccer normally.

Justin Cummings:

Yeah. That's gotta be nice to kind of have the cameras there, even if it's not on them, it's still, you know something's happening. Talk to me a bit about that. The way you say it doesn't sound like you were trying to, you know, do anything super radical, you're just trying to,

Kathrine Switzer:

To help the team out. Right, right. Of course was torn because I thought I am going to finish last. There's just no way I'm going to not finish last and how can I run respectably, you know, these guys are, you know, under five minutes a mile

and so, how can I run respectably? And fortunately I ran like, I think I ran a 5:56, so I was, I was pleased at least I'd broken six minutes a mile, but nobody seemed to mind. Everybody gave you a big cheer.

Justin Cummings: It was great. Did any of the other schools mind?

Kathrine Switzer: No. None of the other schools seemed to mind. And in fact, we had a really interesting situation. I don't remember what school it was, but in the 800, Marty caught this guy and, and he laughed and he let her go by him and she actually beat him. So the picture in the newspaper the next day was of her coming in and breaking the tape with him behind her. And I said, Marty doesn't even finish last. I don't think the guy was too happy, but the picture is, it turns out, I mean, he, I think he was being a little chivalrous, but, um, we were given it her all trying our best.

Justin Cummings: It was chivalrous up until it made him feel like he was foolish. To me. He's like, "Hey, wait a minute. No, no, no, no, no." That's not how this works. But that's not the last time cameras would follow you at an event, nor would you be running in the rain. Talk to me a bit about why the avalanche of publicity then would be later on talking about the Boston Marathon.

Kathrine Switzer: Yes, but let's say why the avalanche of publicity happened in the first place. It was because it was so unusual that a girl was running on the men's team. And the publicity, I would say for the most part, like on the big, the big media stuff, the AP, the UPI, the TV cameras that came down from New York and all that kind of stuff, it was pretty positive. They say things like, you know, "Leggy lady runs with men," or something like that. But the mail was not necessarily [positive]. We got a lot of very weird mail, (as well as very positive mail) of really people questioning why a woman would do that, how inappropriate it was, how dangerous it was for you — "Definitely your uterus was going to fall out,

and if that didn't happen, you'd turn into a man. And, you know, it's not a good thing to sweat in public. This is unbecoming to women and, consequently undermining women," and giving them the same old myths we had grown up with so that women were afraid to do anything athletic. We didn't understand, why you couldn't be everything. That's certainly how I believed. Then it carried over to, the certainly the Boston Marathon. The next year there were two guys on the team that year at Lynchburg, a guy by the name of Robert Moss and a guy by the name of Jim Tiffany. And I think that they didn't tell Coach Moon. They sneaked off two weeks before this particular track meet to run something amazing called the Boston Marathon. When they came back, I think they were pretty beat up and sore and didn't perform very well for a while.

But anyway, because a marathon is 26 miles, 385 yards, and I think the longest event for the men in track was three miles in those days. (I guess they have changed it to 5,000 now, right? 5,000 meters. You don't run miles anymore.) Anyway, I was fascinated by this. I was also writing sports for The Critograph, and I covered these guys and I said, "Wow, 26 miles, 385 yards, that's really

amazing!" I remember saying to Robert Moss, I said, "What did you run? He said, three hours, 45 minutes." I said, "Wow, that sounds great to me.. Were there any women running?" And he said, "One," and I said, "Really?" And he said, "Yeah." I said, "What does she run?" He said, "A 3:20." And I said, "What! You let a girl beat you?"

Kathrine Switzer: I'll never forget I said that! And he was kind of looked at the ceiling and rolled his eyes. I thought, "Well, you know, that's interesting. A woman has done it and she ran pretty well. She outran Robert Moss. So, you know, obviously women can do it. No big deal. But I was fascinated by the distance because I was struggling with this 800 and the mile that I was running at Lynchburg because it seemed so short. I ran other AAU meets and the Quantico relays and that kind of stuff. Anyway, I transferred to Syracuse University that year because I wanted to study journalism and I'd taken every journalism course that they had at Lynchburg. Nowadays, I would have stayed, but I really wanted a degree in journalism because I really wanted to be a sports journalist and Syracuse had a very good journalism school. So I went up to what I call "the frozen Tundra," the great north, very cold. We had nine yards of snow that year, nine yards of snow. It was just unbelievable.

Justin Cummings: I was there one day and that was cold enough.

Kathrine Switzer: Yeah. And the amazing thing was that there were no intercollegiate sports at Syracuse for women. None. Really. Yeah. They had "play days." Can you imagine this? And the 25 sports for man, they were powerhouse university for them. All of them had scholarships. It was phenomenal. And I thought, why don't women here get it? You know? So I said, "Okay, it doesn't matter, I'm here for journalism and I can run by myself, right, which is one reason why I love running so much." But then I decided, "Well, if Coach Moon let me run on the men's team, maybe they'll let me run on the men's team here. So I went and talked to the track coach, you know, decided to do it properly. And he said, "No, you can't run officially. It's against NCAA rules.

You know, you were in a different division [at Lynchburg], but we would welcome you to come and work out with the team." And I thought, oh great. That's terrific. I said, "Fine, coach. I would love to do that." And as I left his office, I'll never forget this, pulling the door shut behind me and I heard him burst out laughing to his colleagues just before I shut the door. He thought I had the door shut and he goes, "Huh, I guess I got rid of her." And so I was really nervous, but I decided I wanted to run with them. He said I could come out there. So I showed up and I think he was extremely surprised. And like at Lynchburg it was really quite phenomenal. The men were really wonderful to me, very welcoming, particularly a volunteer coach they had, who was really old, his name was Arny Briggs. He was 50.

He was ancient. [Laughter] And and he was an ex-marathoner. He sort of took me under his wing and began running with me and telling me how great I could be. And then when I told him one night that I wanted to run a marathon, he

said, "Don't be ridiculous. A woman can't run a marathon." I said, "What? Here? We're running together all this time. You're telling me how great I could be?" And he said, "Yeah, but a marathon's a different thing." And I said, "Yeah, I know it's a different thing, but you know, why can't I do it?" We argued and finally he told me that if I proved to him in practice that I could do it with you take me to the Boston Marathon. Yes.

Justin Cummings: Did you take you?

Kathrine Switzer: He did. Um, because when the day came for us to run our 26 miles, I said, "Let's keep going, because we want to make sure no matter what, we can finish the Boston Marathon. Let's do another five miles." So we did 31 miles and at the end of the workout he passed out.

Justin Cummings: I take it you did not because you remember him passing out

Kathrine Switzer: I was getting better and better and he was falling off the game. And when he came to, he said, "Women have hidden potential in endurance and stamina!" So we had discovered a new universe. It was amazing. The guys wouldn't come run with us more than after 14 miles. He said, "You guys are crazy people!" But I got better and better and I could foot it it with them if the distance got long enough. Arnie was really, really overwhelmed because he saw it. He was witness to it and he just was like an evangelist about it and it was amazing. Here's a guy who had run 15 Boston Marathons. He was 50 years old, deeply entrenched in the myth that women were weaker and fragile and couldn't do things. Now he saw that the endurance and stamina was phenomenal. Women don't have the speed and the power, but we've got the endurance, stamina, flexibility, and balance.

Does it make men better or women better? It makes us different and we have to think for 3000 years Olympic sports has been about speed, power and strength and it's only really been in the last hundred years, but even the last 50 years since women have had an opportunity and the science and the disposable time and money to become athletes, to explore their abilities. I love saying, listen, listen about their young people. There's going to be a huge, huge change in sports where women's sports is going to be very popular and publicizeable and maybe it's going to be in sports that we don't quite know what they are yet. And you can create that. It's gonna be a very, very interesting career path.

Justin Cummings: That's crazy to think that this was only 50 years ago that, that these, these myths were held that, you know, you had actual medical professionals saying if you run longer than it takes to catch your children, you will die and become a man and terrible things. And that's not that long ago. And just how rapidly culture has shifted. And it's not that we're there, but it's, things have moved so much it's just staggering.

Kathrine Switzer: They have, but if you look around the world, you're still looking at women who are not allowed to go out of the house, get an education, drive a car, carry a passport. And those are countries who sincerely still believe the worst possible kinds of myths about women. And then of course women themselves, believe them because they have no opportunity to see anything else. And that's one reason why I've created a foundation that's called 261 Fearless. We haven't told the Boston marathon story yet, but it's named after my bib number from the Boston Marathon. To show women, uh, with a community club or gathering how you can take that first step because they're afraid even to take the first step and you just sometimes need somebody to hold your hand and to show you how to be fearless because the act of running, Natalie was saying this too, the whole sense of empowerment is so phenomenal that that women can take something like running, which is easy, convenient, cheap, and accessible, with nothing else in their lives, they can start to run and they can have that overwhelming sense of empowerment and it changes everything.

Justin Cummings: It's amazing. You don't need a special location. You don't need anything like that. You just go. Natalie, did you want to talk a bit about that kind of the confidence and building that confidence?

Natalie Deacon: Yeah, absolutely. So I started reading your book yesterday, Marathon Woman, and I've just loved second of it so far. And one of the parts I really liked, You said, "When I ran, I felt like I was touching God or he was touching me." And then you just talk a little bit about this magic that you felt when you ran and what it did for you as a woman and your confidence. I know you had parents that really raised in a way that empowered you, which was pretty uncommon at the time. Could you just tell us a little bit about that concept of the magic?

Kathrine Switzer: Yeah. I couldn't quite figure out what it was, but I still feel it, which is, you know, as I say, 60 years later, it is amazing. And whether it is the unity with the earth, the sky, the sun, the elements, or it's feet on the ground touching earth, connected to connectivity. What it also really is, on a purely chemical sense, is probably a release of endorphins, and also the sense of accomplishment. So when everything else in life is sometimes totally unmeasurable, or you're having a really crappy day in general, at least with the run, you've gotten something accomplished and you feel, "I've done that." And also it's because you've done it for yourself, which is another thing that women are not used to doing. I mean, throughout history we've had to give it all away. You know, the kids, the dog, the house, husband, you know, everything else is first before you, yourself.

And often even now women feel, oh my gosh, how am I going to work out this work-life balance? You know, I got a job now, I got the house, I got the kids, I've got to get the kids off to school. There was no time in there for me. And when they take that 20 minutes, they have that return and say, hey, yeah, it's okay, I can do it all. It really makes a difference. So it is magic and on many, many respects. And I've seen more and more women who start to run, who changed their lives with getting a better education or asking for a raise or getting a better job, whatever. It's great.

Natalie Deacon: That's fantastic.

Kathrine Switzer: Yeah, it is. Well, you and I know you feel it too.

Natalie Deacon: Absolutely.

Kathrine Switzer: I mean, even you, I would love to bring this up on this broadcast, which is, after you've graduated now you'd say, "Eh, you know, I really like to run and I'm going to ask the coach for a couple of years if I can run after while you're working on your master's." Right?

Natalie Deacon: Right. Absolutely. Once I finished that first year of running, I actually found a loophole where I was able to coach soccer and simultaneously run track. And just a really incredible experience, you know, involved me getting up at 6 a.m. and doing some runs at crazy hours of the day, but just truly that sense of accomplishment that comes with it. And people ask you, you know, why would you put yourself through this training and what, you know, what are you gaining out of that? And I know there's no way to describe the feeling that you get a fear that when you step up to that line, but then also the incredible sensation when you cross the finish line or when the gun goes off. And I'm just so many things that, you know, unless you really do, it's, it's difficult to describe, but, um, it is the most empowering feeling and I wouldn't have traded, you know, my opportunity to do that for the,

Kathrine Switzer: I think that's fantastic. And I, and I think a lot of older women — not that you're older, but what I mean is that once you've graduated, traditionally after you've had a great career like you have had in soccer, they really go into a trough afterwards because they don't quite know what to do with themselves. So there are two things. What can we do about that? But the other thing is don't you find running more soccer, running because it's so measurable. What I call the "physiological curiousness" and other words. One reason why I wanted to run long was because I was really curious, how far can I go? And you've got to be feeling, "I wonder if I can really kind of bring that time down another 30 seconds. Well, not 30 seconds. Maybe one second. Because yours is done by one second.

Natalie Deacon: I remember coming back that second year for running and a big reason why I decided to do that was, you know, that question that was just lingering in my mind, I wonder what my body is capable of. I wonder what it can do. And just finding the power in that is just, it's almost like a sense of discovery of, you know, for me it was learning more about who I am and also for me and know who I believe that God created me to be. And it was just this really beautiful journey.

Kathrine Switzer: Yeah. I mean, Steve Prefontaine you said to not do the best you can, to give it everything you have, is not to honor the gift. And really to try really, really hard and really surprise yourself. You know, then, you come across the finish line,

you look at the clock, you say, "I did it! Wow. What else can they do?" That's great.

Justin Cummings: So we only have a few minutes left here, so I want to make sure that we, that we get to this before we run out of time here. Let's talk about the Boston Marathon. Let's talk for those who don't know. Let's, let's get to it. We've been building, let's talk about the the big event. So, what happened?

Kathrine Switzer: Okay, I'll have to tell it in brief because my coach the, lived up to his promise to help me sign up for the race. He said, you've got to sign up officially. I thought we could just go and, you know.

Justin Cummings: Sneak in,

Kathrine Switzer: No, not sneak in. Just jump in. It had been done before. I wasn't going to Boston to prove anything. This is my reward now. It's already been done. A woman's done it. I'm going to go because it's my reward from Arnie and he was very proud of me. No, you have to officially register. I'd been working as a journalist. I had been signing my name "K.V. Switzer," because you know, I wanted to be T.S. Elliot and J.D. Salinger and my dad had misspelled my name on my birth certificate. So it was really much more convenient for me to sign "K.V. Switzer." So I sign the entry form "K.V. Switzer." And by the way, the entry form had nothing about gender on it, but I wasn't,

Justin Cummings: They just assume that it was male. So why even put the mark?

Kathrine Switzer: I wasn't trying to to fake them out in any way. And so we sent in our paperwork and then we got the bib numbers on the morning of the race and my coach picked up the bib numbers for everybody on the team who went up there. Because it was snowing and sleeting, it was just utterly miserable, and he says, "Stay in the car, there's no point in everybody getting wet." And he just went and picked up the team packet like you do for a cross country race. So, so we came out of the car and pinned on all our bib numbers and started warming up and I was really disappointed. I had a really cute outfit on. I wanted to show off shorts and top and, and I had to wear a baggy gray sweatsuit cause it was absolutely freezing.

It was like 35 degrees with a headwind and sleet and snow is miserable. We looked like refugees, like we had on everything we owned. And I suppose that played into my favor because all the men knew that I was a woman and came up to me and congratulated me. But the officials obviously couldn't tell I was a woman. They weren't looking for anybody. There was chaos getting the race started and everything. So down the road we went, we were all happy campers and I'm about a mile into the race. The press truck came by us taking pictures, we waved, you know, on the nightly news. And then all of a sudden, the race director jumped off the press truck and the bus, there's another bus behind the press truck, which was behind us. So I didn't see him coming.

I heard him at the last minute because I heard feet running quickly in leather shoes. And I turned and this fierce face was right in my face, screamed at me, "Get the hell out of my race and give me those numbers!" He grabbed me by the shoulders and threw me back and tried to rip off my bib numbers. And my coach started screaming at him, "Leave her alone. And my boyfriend, who was an ex- All-American football player, 235 pounds, came flying full tilt and gave him a shoulder charge and knocked him out of the race instead, and went right through the air. It was quite breathtaking. I was scared out of my mind. You all are smiling because it is hilarious. And the pictures, also in many ways, they're shocking, but they're also funny.

"Girl saved by boyfriend." And coach said, "Run like hell," and down the street we went. The press truck stayed with us for quite a while. Very aggressive and combative. What are you trying to prove? When are you going to drop out? And finally they left when they saw that I was serious. They were wanting me desperately to drop out. And I turned to my coach and said I was going to finish this race on my hands and my knees if I had to. I was just so determined because I knew if I didn't, nobody would have believed women could do it. So I went on to finish the race and by the time I finished the race, you know, you can't run and stay mad. I'd come to the resolution that I wanted to become a better athlete and to create opportunities for women because women weren't there. And I knew that if I could create those opportunities for them, they would be. It wasn't the official's fault. He was just an old fogey who is a product of the time.

Justin Cummings: Thank you so much for being here today. Do you want to plug your book and charity one more time?

Kathrine Switzer: Sure. Well, "Marathon Woman," you know, un-put-down-able, bestselling book. Plenty of beer, sex, and rock and roll in the book to keep anybody happy. Available on Amazon and even an audio books. And 261 Fearless. Join us. We look for women everywhere to start a club and help other women who can run. 261fearless.org and push the button for starting a club or join us. We'd love to have you.

Justin Cummings: All right. Well, Katherine, thank you Natalie. Thank you as well for joining us. That's it for this episode of A Smarter U and we will see you all next time. Bye.