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Living Legend

While battling cancer, marathon great Grete Waitz continues to carry the torch for women's athletics.

By Paige Dunn

From the time she was a girl, Norwegian-born distance runner Grete Waitz wanted to be the best in the world. Beginning her professional tenure in the early 1970s, when women's running was in its infancy and women were fighting for athletic equality, Waitz built a barrier-breaking career that helped pave the way for millions of others and cemented her role in history as a pioneer of women's sports.

She ran the 1500 meters in the 1972 Munich Olympics, the first time women were allowed to compete in that distance in the Games. In 1975 she was among the first women to run the 3000 meters competitively, and she broke the world record twice. She set the world record in the marathon four times, including becoming the first woman to run a sub-2:30 when she won the 1979 New York City Marathon in 2:27:33. In 1984 in Los Angeles, she took the silver medal (Joan Benoit, the gold) in the first women's Olympic marathon. She continued to rack up wins, including the 1988 NYC marathon—her ninth title in that race—until her retirement in 1990.

But since being diagnosed with cancer in April 2005, Waitz, now 54, has had to apply her legendary determination and force of will to a more important goal—survival.

After feeling “unusually sluggish” after a run, Waitz scheduled an appointment with her doctor. “What seemed a standard visit, led to the unimaginable. My doctor called me three hours later with my blood work results and told me I had cancer and had to begin treatment immediately,” she said during a 2005 NYC Marathon press conference, when she first announced her illness. “One day you’re happy and laughing and the next you’re crying. What a shock it was.”

A self-described “private person,” Waitz has never revealed what type of cancer she has and rarely discusses her treatment in public. “I am not going to go into details until I kick this thing,” she said in 2005.

When she was diagnosed, she had been retired for 15 years and was running 35 to 40 miles a week. After her first series of chemotherapy treatments (she’s revealed she’s undergone at least two since her diagnosis), she could manage only a mile or two. But it wasn’t about the distance—it was about continuing to participate in the sport she loves so dearly.

She refuses to stop running, knowing that being fit helps her tolerate the chemo treatments. Waitz runs four or five miles one to two times per week. On other days she spins or uses the elliptical trainer for one hour or more. Exercise makes her feel healthy and keeps her strong, physically and mentally. “The only time I feel sick is when I go in for chemo—when I see it around me. Every other day I focus on feeling healthy,” she says.

She also continues to speak passionately about running, as well as the importance of an active lifestyle. She travels to races around the world to meet, run with, and encourage women of all athletic abilities. She recently published her fifth book, *Run Your First Marathon: Everything You Need to Know to Reach the Finish Line*.

Waitz says her proudest accomplishment to date is the launch of an activity center for cancer patients, the Breathing Room, at a hospital in Norway. Waitz, along with her husband, Jack, raised over \$500,000 to open the center in the summer of 2007. Treadmills, stationary bikes and weight machines fill the center and activities include group exercise classes.

“Research shows that exercise increases the quality of life for cancer patients. The better shape you’re in, the better you can handle the treatments necessary to fight cancer,” says Waitz.

During the 2006 NYC Marathon, Waitz presented first-time marathoner and fellow cancer survivor Lance Armstrong with his finisher’s medal. Shortly after she revealed publicly that she had cancer, Armstrong reached out to her in support. “He has helped me see that despite my diagnosis I can live a good life. I am in control of that.” 