

Black American female runners are blazing a new trail in the marathon

Systemic racism created barriers for Black American women to compete in distance races, but a new documentary is bringing attention to their stories

By [Kelyn Soong](#)

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Shortly after professional runner Erika Kemp finished the Boston Marathon earlier this month, she opened up her Instagram account to dozens of direct messages — many from Black women.

They thanked her for serving as an inspiration and congratulated her for making history. The women, like Kemp, understood what she had just accomplished. By finishing her debut marathon in 2 hours 33 minutes and 57 seconds, the 28-year-old Kemp now tops an exclusive list of Black American female marathoners to break the three-hour barrier. Surprisingly, she is only the 30th Black woman born or raised in the United States to make the list, which is compiled by Gary Corbitt, a historian for the National Black Marathoners Association.

The stories of these runners, and the fact that relatively few Black American women have broken the three-hour marathon barrier, have received renewed attention because of the recent documentary, "Breaking Three Hours: Trailblazing African American Women Marathoners."

The significance of this moment is not lost on Kemp. "I promise I won't be at the top of the list for too long — there's a lot more coming," she said in a tweet.

'The only Black and only female'

Black women runners from Kenya and Ethiopia have set records in the marathon. But in the United States, elite long-distance running has historically been dominated by White runners, due in large part to systemic racism and stereotypes that have created barriers to Black runners competing in distance events.

One reason is that Black American runners often face the stereotype and assumption that they are more likely to excel by competing at shorter distances.

"For African Americans, we faced an uphill battle of people telling us that we're sprinters, we're not distance runners," said Tony Reed, who directed the documentary and is the co-founder and executive director of the [National Black Marathoners Association](#).

There are other barriers. Kemp, who was born in Okinawa, Japan, on a U.S. air base but raised in New Jersey, believes media coverage has often overlooked the accomplishments of Black distance runners. "There are a lot of people who deserve more coverage," she said. Alison Mariella Désir, author of the book, "[Running While Black: Finding Freedom in a Sport That Wasn't Built for Us](#)," said it's also a matter of limited safe spaces in Black communities.

"What you need is physical safety, psychological safety, you need access to clean air, you need access to safe streets, you need access to tree coverage," she said. "All of these things that are limited in Black communities around the country, because of historical and present day practices of segregation and zoning."

Corbitt, the historian, has taken on the role of documenting the [history of Black distance runners](#), including compiling what has become known as "The List," which tracks Black American female marathoners who break the three-hour barrier. For now, the list includes only women born or raised in the United States, although Corbitt said he hopes to expand it to include naturalized U.S. citizens.

Corbitt's father was the late famed [distance runner Ted Corbitt](#), the grandson of enslaved people and a distance-running pioneer. He was the [first president of the New York Road Runners](#), which now organizes the New York City Marathon.

"The sport has not done a good job in keeping records and history of the sport, and it's even less so with Black running history," Gary Corbitt said.

Included on the list is Marilyn Bevans, now 73. Bevans was born and raised in Baltimore and liked to run distance even though in the pre-title IX era, she faced a shortage of opportunities. There were no cross-country or track and field teams for women at her high school or at Morgan State University, where she attended college.

While in graduate school at Springfield College in Massachusetts, the men's coach, Vern Cox, saw her running and invited her to train with the men's distance team, Bevans said. After moving back to Baltimore, Bevans joined the Baltimore Road Runners, where one of the members asked her to join them for a 20-mile training run for an upcoming marathon. "I was the only Black and only female there," Bevans said.

"It's good to see Black women and any other ethnic group run well in the marathon," Bevans said. "That wasn't always the case. You go through history and you were told, you couldn't run if you're female, and you couldn't run if you're Black."

Intentionally breaking barriers

Growing up in Fairfax County, Va., Alisa Harvey idolized Wilma Rudolph, the Olympic champion sprinter in the 100-meter and 200-meter dash. But Harvey quickly found success in the middle-distance events while competing at Thomas Jefferson High School.

"I tried the 800 [meters] and won it, and that's where I stayed," she said.

Harvey, 57, became a track star at Thomas Jefferson, setting the Virginia state meet record in the 1,600 meters, and she was also the school's first Black female cross-country runner.

She said that she intentionally set out to break barriers outside the sport, too. She became the school's first Black cheerleader and Black princess on the homecoming court.

"Anything extracurricular was all White," Harvey said. "There were no African Americans, literally. So I figured since I had started to get prominence in my sport, I was going to use that to break some barriers."

Harvey ran at the University of Tennessee on a full scholarship, where she became the 1986 NCAA 1,500-meter champion. She competed in three U.S. Olympic Track and Field Trials in the 800 meters and 1,500 meters, and turned to distance road racing in her 30s because "it was lucrative."

"That's how I would supplement my income," Harvey said.

She ran the 1999 Richmond Marathon — her debut at the distance — in 2:49:28, a time that qualified her for the 2000 U.S. Olympic Marathon Trials in Columbia, S.C. While she didn't make the Olympic team, her appearance at the race received national media attention because the course passed by the South Carolina State House, which flew the Confederate flag.

She believes the dearth of elite Black female marathoners in the United States is because of a lack of mentors and role models. Harvey wishes she had known of Bevens earlier in her career.

"For me to see a Black woman out there crossing the finish line ... would've been way more motivating," she said. "If I had known of Marilyn Bevens back in the 1980s, heck yeah, I would have done a marathon, and I would have done it right probably, too."

A growing list

When Kemp was growing up, her distance-running role models were mostly White. Learning about trailblazers such as Bevens and the Black female marathoners featured in the documentary in recent years has fueled her fire.

"It also makes me very grateful for growing up in a time that I have," said Kemp, who turned pro in 2018 after a six-time all-American career at North Carolina State University. "I didn't have to contend with a lot of the adversity that they did, so it just makes me want to take full advantage of that."

"I promise I won't be at the top of the list for too long — there's a lot more coming," Kemp said of Black women running a sub-three-hour marathon. (Michael Scott)

The list of Black female marathoners in the United States is short, but not “because Black women aren’t capable of it,” Kemp said. “Endurance sports, in general, have not been a historically diverse space.”

Still, Kemp is hopeful that there will be more Black women joining her on the list, crediting groups like Pioneers Run Crew, TrailblazHers Run Co., Black Girls Run and Black Men Run for making distance running more inclusive. In fact, she believes her training partner, Marielle Hall, will soon overtake her marathon record.

“I think these start lines are going to look a lot different in two to four years,” Kemp said.