

# *Dale Greig, Early Women's Marathoner, Is Dead at 81*

By **Richard Sandomir**

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Dale Greig had been a champion cross-country runner in Scotland when she decided to run the Isle of Wight Marathon in 1964.

It was a bold decision. Not only was it her first marathon; she was also entering what had been an exclusively male preserve.

Women were all but excluded from running the 26-mile 385-yard race because the track authorities believed that they were too weak to endure it. There would be no women's Olympic marathon until 1984.

Race organizers on the Isle of Wight were sympathetic enough to let Greig (pronounced GREG) run. But they required her to start four minutes before the 67 men in the field, and sent an ambulance behind her in case she faltered or collapsed. Her mother, Anna, followed in a car.

Greig was nervous but survived the day's rigors — unlike 19 of the men, who did not finish. Running in the 80-degree heat on a hilly course, she completed the race in 3 hours 27 minutes 25 seconds. The International Association of Athletics Federations, the governing body of track and field, would later record that time as a world best for a woman on a certified course.

"Once I started, I knew things would be all right," she said afterward, adding, "I felt sorry for the men I kept passing in the closing stages — they looked embarrassed."

Greig died on May 12 in a hospice in Paisley, Scotland. Her death, confirmed by Co-Op Funeral Care, was not widely reported at the time. She was 81.

Her finish at the Isle of Wight bettered two previous world bests. The British runner Violet Piercy posted a 3:40:22 time for a solo run in 1926 in London (which may have been only 22 miles long, Runner's World magazine reported in 2014). In December 1963, Merry Lepper ran the Western Hemisphere Marathon in Culver City, Calif., in 3:37:07, after sneaking into the race with a female friend, also a runner. Together they leapt from behind a hedge after the starter's pistol went off, but the friend quit before finishing the race.

"At the time, women weren't allowed to run long-distance events," Lepper wrote in 2017 on The Players' Tribune. "In fact, the longest Olympic race that women were allowed to compete in was the 800 meters. I wanted to demolish those expectations."

Women's times have improved in the decades since; Paula Radcliffe of Britain set the fastest time to date, 2:15:25, at the 2003 London Marathon.

Dale Sheldon Greig was born on May 15, 1937, in Paisley, about 10 miles west of Glasgow. She started as a sprinter in school before extending herself to races of 880 yards and a mile, winning four bronze medals at the latter distance between 1958 and 1966 in the Scottish women's national championships. In 1960, she won the first of four national titles in cross-country races.

By 1964 she felt ready for that first marathon on the Isle of Wight, off the southern coast of England. She was confident in her preparation, which focused on training runs of at least 30 miles. On race day, May 23, 1964, she had the stamina to catch up to some of the men in the last few miles.

The organizers' decision to let her race — albeit by having her start before the men — earned them a reprimand from a regional athletics association that reflected the state of women's amateur athletics at the time. In a letter, the group warned that “in athletics women are not allowed to compete with men” because “the resulting publicity is not good for the sport.”

She continued to race all the same, including in the Isle of Man 40-mile race and the Ben Nevis 10-mile mountain marathon in Scotland, both in 1971. She gave up the sport in 1982, after she cracked bones in the heels of both feet jumping into a pool; she had misjudged the depth of the water.

No immediate family members survive. Her twin sister, Cynthia, died in 2013.

Greig, who worked for many years in a printing business and as a race organizer and track writer, earned no money from her races, although she did win prizes, including cutlery sets and table lamps.

“I believe in the amateur code and actually gave away my prizes,” she told the Scottish newspaper The Herald in 2015.

Arnold Black, the historian for Scottish Athletics, the country's governing body for track and field, wrote about Greig on the organization's website:

“Her pioneering efforts opened the way for women throughout the world to be admitted to marathon races, having ventured into uncharted territory at a time when some respected authorities still believed that running such long distances was harmful for a woman.”

**Correction:** June 18, 2019

*Because of an editing error, an earlier version of the headline with this obituary misstated Greig's age. She was 81, not 82. (As the obituary states, she was born on May 15, 1937, and died on May 12.)*

A version of this article appears in print on June 19, 2019, on Page A26 of the New York edition with the headline: Dale Greig, 81, Marathoner Who Sped Past Men, Dies