

JOAN BENOIT

Joan Benoit is the kind of women songs should be written about. Maybe several songs. "The Ballad of St. Joan." A word picture put to music.

Can you imagine what that woman was like as a youngster? Close your eyes. It's easy, isn't it? Fresh pink cheeks in the Maine snow. Going a little too fast on her skis. How about a crisp fall day with short white legs under a plaid field-hockey skirt flashing ahead of her competitors toward the goal?

Open your eyes. Close them again. Watch her now in Olympia. Boyish dark hair, incredible strength and anxiety conflicting on her face as she waits for the finish line to arrive before her body fails her heart, her will, her guts. See her incredulity as no one follows her toward the gold medal in the golden sunshine in a town this woman could only visit before going home again.

For those of you with less imagination and a library card, look on page 55 of the January 14 edition of Newsweek. Right! The "Newsmakers," and there's our little Joanie standing next to a fifth-grader named Charity. Joan's outfit (please forgive me, J.B.) even looks a little like the school-girl's. Charity is being honored at Studio 54 by Ms. magazine for "spunk," among other things. Spunk.

Joan Benoit in a dress from "Little House on the Prairie" sandwiched between Cyndi Lauper, a rocker with orange hair, and Geraldine Ferraro, a woman who was a heartbeat away from a footnote in history. Now that's an image. Now that's spunk.

Close your eyes. Imagine there's a whole lot more to Joan Benoit than a new clothing line, magazine covers, gold medals and world records. There is a lot more:

T&FN: I am interested about how life's been since the Olympic awards ceremony. What has been the biggest change?

Benoit: Well, I never have any time, that's the first thing. I guess the best statement... and I've said it before... is that until the Olympics, I scheduled my day around running. After the Olympics, I scheduled my running around my day. Before, nothing took priority over running.

T&FN: What has been the greatest lesson?

Benoit: It is very difficult to say "No." Finally, I'm learning how to say "No," and I'm learning how to say it graciously. Everybody wants to touch an Olympian. There really aren't very many of us. There are even fewer medalists and not many gold medalists at all. But, really, how long can you go on the banquet circuit?

T&FN: You sound frazzled.

Benoit: If I had decided the Olympics was my last competition, the situation might be different. But I have some goals, some other things I still want to accomplish.



Diane Johnson

Whenever I have time now, I find myself overtraining and courting injury.

T&FN: *I suspected you'd have more trouble with the acclaim than the winning.*

Benoit: The race of my life was at the Olympic Trials. As accolades themselves, the Olympics was it. But that was a relatively easy run. But... this lack of time. It is hard for me to say "No more competitive running," because there is more to do.

T&FN: *Must you hibernate to continue to improve?*

Benoit: I hope not, because I don't want to and I don't think I should. It's mostly a matter of scheduling. Scott and I haven't seen much of each other since we got married. We set aside a month or so around Christmas, when he's out of school, to be together and it's worked pretty well. But something always seems to come up.

T&FN: *Like what?*

Benoit: I was very honored to be a recipient of one of *Ms. Magazine's* "Women Of The Year" awards. However, the presentation ceremony was during the month Scott and I had set aside. We wanted to stay close to home. I was the only one of 12 women to say I couldn't make it. The magazine called and said that Peter Ueberroth could make it and that he had agreed to accept an award in my behalf. He had just been named "Man Of The Year" by *Time!* That changed my mind. I went and enjoyed it immensely, but it sure wasn't in the plans.

T&FN: *Can you ever train well again?*

Benoit: I just don't know. Of course, I believe you can do anything you want to do... I don't think most people understand. Running is a very selfish sport. I'm lucky. It's quiet here in Maine and Scott has his own life with his own goals so that I'm not pressured that way.

T&FN: *What's been the biggest hassle?*

Benoit: Constantly being harassed. Oh, I don't want to use that word. Race directors have been very demanding. When I run a race, it is very difficult to go to 10 media opportunities on Saturday and then run my best. I'm going to make a deal with them from now on. I will go to a race to promote it, or to compete in it, but I can't do both. I will answer questions after a race, of course, but it's important that I have the opportunity to do my best.

T&FN: *We've talked about the downside of fame. What's been good?*

Benoit: I haven't changed! My attitude hasn't changed all that much. My friends are still my friends. I don't treat them differently and they don't treat me differently. Oh, notes from so many people. Little gifts. The awards, the invitations.

Right now I'm watching the sun go down and an American flag is flying in the breeze. Senator Mitchell of Maine had 3

flags flown over the Capitol. He gave one to me and the other two went to Maine's other Olympians. A former governor gave me a state flag which flies below the U.S. flag. That's pretty special.

T&FN: *You're pretty special yourself. Do you do any work with charities?*

Benoit: I've "worked" with the Multiple Sclerosis Society and with the

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Special Olympics. You have to give something back. I've taken so much from the sport. That's one reason I coached at B.U. for 2 years.

T&FN: *How are the locals treating you? Didn't you get trapped by fans this past summer in a local supermarket?*

Benoit: Hardly trapped! Besides, that was during tourist season. Maine people rarely go out of their way to congratulate you. They respect me for who I am, not for what I've done.

T&FN: *What does Joan Benoit miss most about those pre-gold days?*

Benoit: The thing I've missed the most is not getting into a daily routine. You never know who's on the phone or who will make an 11th-hour plea.

T&FN: *Edwin Moses once said that "An athlete has a heavy responsibility placed on him whether he wants it or not."*

Benoit: Society looks up to athletes. For someone to do something that's not cool, it is difficult to swallow.

T&FN: *Like getting arrested? Or being called gay? Or blaming your opponent for your fall? Seems like so many of our heroes and heroines—at least in this sport—have fallen from their pedestals.*

Benoit: I know how the press can distort the truth. I know it. Edwin is a marvelous man and I respect him a great deal.

T&FN: *Let's change the subject completely. What's so special about lobstering?*

Benoit: That was just something the press got ahold of. It's something I really don't do. Not at all last year. I have friends who do lobster. It's very similar to running in some ways. Working hard, being alone.

T&FN: *How is your running coming along?*

Benoit: My training is not going well

at all. It's been very erratic, more bad runs than good runs. My right knee [the one operated upon before the Olympic Trials] has been doing well. There were some minor problems after the Olympics, but they went away with rest.

T&FN: *You do sound tired. You mentioned goals earlier. What are they?*

Benoit: There are a few things I want to accomplish. I want to give it an honest effort, a legitimate effort. At least I will have tried.

T&FN: *Joan?!*

Benoit: I want to improve my marathon time. I'd love to try to break 2:20. I'm not saying I will, but I think somebody will in the next 2 years. I'd like to run a sub-31:00 10K.

T&FN: *You'd "love to try?" What kind of goal is that?*

Benoit: Well, if I'm not capable of running a sub-2:20, I'm at least capable of improving on the World Record... I once thought that maybe the Olympics might have been my last race. But I think there's a lot of room for improvement. It's frustrating. I'm worn out. I can't do what I need to do.

T&FN: *I have heard from a fairly reliable source that Fred Lebow was willing to offer you a 7-year contract to run the New York City Marathon.*

Benoit: That's the first I've heard of it. I know Fred's anxious to have me run L'Eggs, but I haven't made a decision on that yet. I am not currently scheduled for any marathons in '85.

T&FN: *What's the most money you've ever been offered to run a single race? What's the most you've ever turned down?*

Benoit: The most I ever rejected was "a considerable sum." I never knew the actual figure because I simply decided I didn't want to run the race. I learned later—from published reports—that the Chicago Marathon was willing to pay me \$50,000, the same as they supposedly paid Lopes.

T&FN: *Before the Olympics, I predicted that if Joan Benoit won, and the race received sufficient television coverage—both of which happened—then we'd see an incredible upsurge in road running by women. Why do you think women haven't rushed to the streets following your victory?*

Benoit: You were wrong! Golly, I don't know. Perhaps women are too smart, too sensible. The television coverage emphasized how difficult it was to run the marathon. Gabriele's [Andersen-Scheiss] problems finishing certainly put a damper on the race as a motivator.

T&FN: *You've said that the press quite often distorts the truth. Joan Benoit is one of America's darlings. A real sweet-*

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BENOIT INTERVIEW—continued:

heart. Sugar and spice and everything. How distorted is that?

Benoit: You have me mixed up with Mary Lou Retton.

T&FN: What do you think people's image of Joan Benoit is?

Benoit: I don't know. I guess they think I am someone who is a winner, someone who has overcome adversity... operations... and the odds. I was an underdog at the Olympics. I gave people hope. I showed them that you can win even when you're not the favorite.

T&FN: Anything more?

Benoit: That people need time to recover from great feats. Some people can just keep going on and on... I can't! But sooner or later it catches up with you. I went through the knee surgery, the Trials—which was by far the most difficult race of my life—then the Olympics themselves; all the hoopla. Then the biggest moment of my life, my wedding. Now, not even being able to muster up enough strength to run a simple 10K.

T&FN: I was hoping you wouldn't still seem so tired.

Benoit: I'm still trying to do too much. I don't know where the time goes, but it's gone much sooner than it used to be.

T&FN: What's your favorite sport?

Benoit: My favorite sport? Good question. I think I'd be wrong if I didn't say "running." Skiing is a favorite. We skied for 4 hours today.

T&FN: Just how good were you as a field hockey player?

Benoit: I was a good collegiate-level player. I used a little bit of finesse with my stick but my endurance was as good (or better) as anybody else's.

T&FN: Is your house finished yet?

Benoit: [sighing] Jack, it will never be finished.

T&FN: You got married recently. Any thoughts about starting a family?

Benoit: Yeah, but I think it'll be a while yet, at least until Scott's out of business school. We don't know yet. I don't know just how long I want to compete, but I wouldn't necessarily quit to start a family. Ingrid Kristiansen had a baby and came back stronger than ever.

T&FN: I hear childbirth is like running a hot weather marathon on a hilly course with a bad leg. Why don't you consider yourself a marathoner?

Benoit: I haven't run as many marathons as I have 10Ks... other track races or even shorter road races. I just haven't done that many of them.

T&FN: Back to the important stuff. What's your name now?

Benoit: I am formally and officially

Joan Samuelson. It's Swedish, not Norwegian. Of course, in running, I will remain Joan Benoit. It seems dumb to sign a picture of Joan Benoit winning the Olympic gold with the name of Samuelson.

T&FN: *What's the nicest thing about being famous?*

Benoit: I, uh, I can't think of anything. As I said, I can't even get into my daily routine.

T&FN: *Jim Fixx used to think the best thing was having someone to meet you at the airport.*

Benoit: That is good! Oh let's see, I've been bumped into first-class a couple of times... If I call for snow tires, and tell them I'm Joan Samuelson, they'll say, "Okay, lady, bring your car in a week from this coming Thursday." If Joan Benoit calls, the tires will be on by tomorrow.

T&FN: *One last thing. Where's the gold medal?*

Benoit: Why does everyone ask that question?

T&FN: *Because everyone doesn't have a gold medal and we all wonder where we'd put it if we did.*

Benoit: Right. It is in a bureau drawer with candlesticks and trivets.

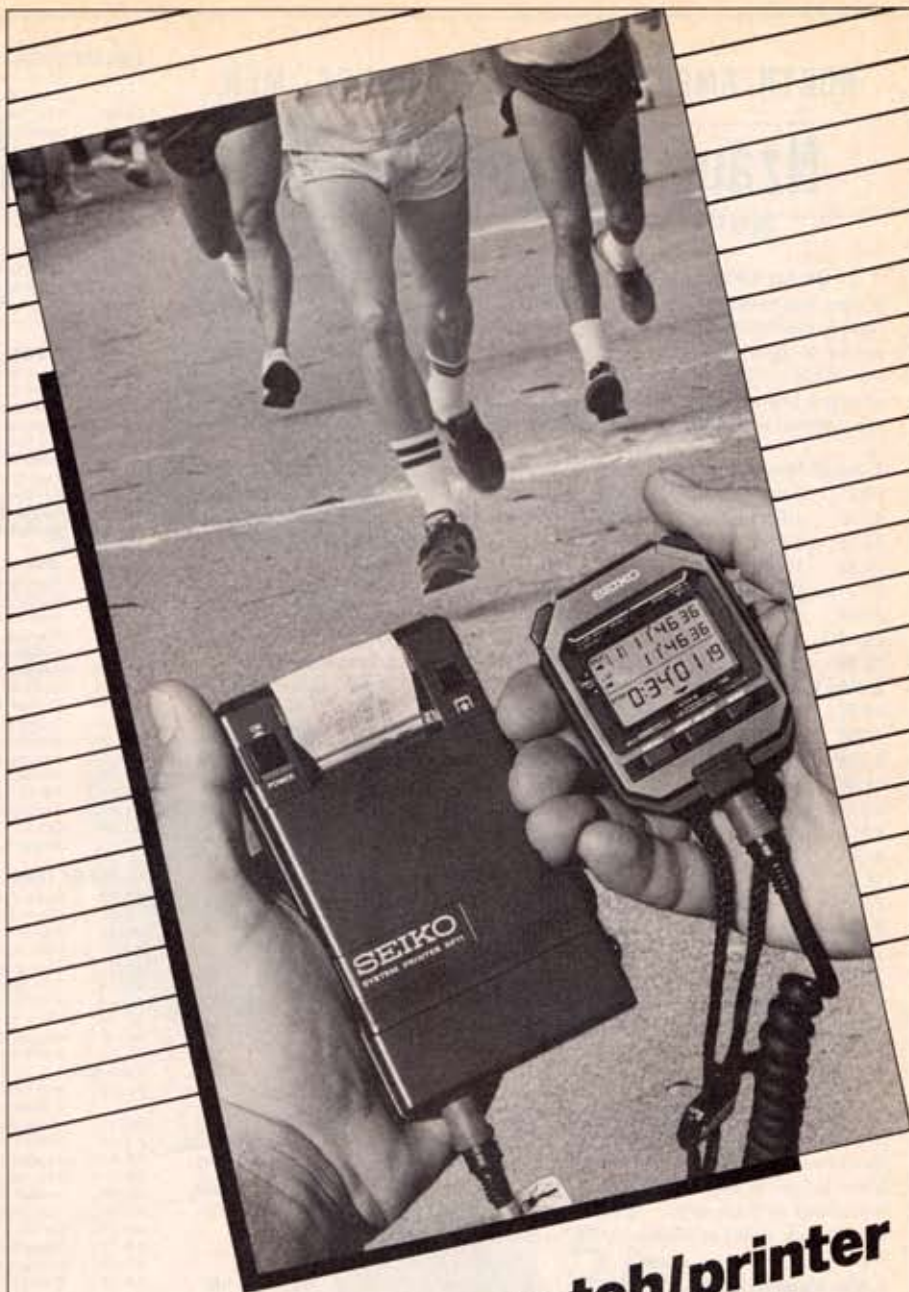
T&FN: *Of course, right where I'd keep mine.* □

Joan Benoit was born May 16, 1957, in Portland, Maine, and is 5-3/105. Recently married Scott Samuelson. Graduated from Cape Elizabeth High School (Maine) in 1975 and Bowdoin College in 1979 after spending her junior year at North Carolina State. Competes for Athletics West and coached by Bob Sevens, U.S. Road Rankings: 1978 (2), 1979 (1), 1980 (3), 1981 (2), 1982 (1), 1983 (1), 1984 (1). Track PRs (with all-time U.S. List position in parentheses): 1500, 4:24.01 '83; Mile, 4:36.48 '83; 3000, 8:53.49 '83; 5000, 15:40.42 '82; 10,000, 32:07.41 '84 (2). Road PRs: 10K, 31:44 '83 (2); 15K, 50:31 '81 (5); 10M, 53:18 '82 (1); 20K & Half-Mar, 1:08:34 '84 (1); 25K, 1:26:21 '81 (1); Mar, 2:22:43 '83 (1). Major meet finishes: 3000-'76 7)TAC, '79 5)TAC 3)AI,AW, '83 1)PAG 6)TAC; 10,000-'77 6)TAC, '79 2)TAC 1)AI,AW, '81 1)TAC; Mar-'84 1)OG 1)OT. Her progression (with world and U.S. Rankings in parentheses):

Year	3000	10,000	Marathon
1975	10:00.0		
1976	9:39.0 (x,10)		
1977		35:12.2	
1978	9:27.6i		
1979	9:02.71 (x, 8)	32:52.7 (x,2)	2:35:15' (3, 1)
1980	10:17.7yi		2:31:23' (9, 3)
1981		33:29.00 (x,1)	2:30:16' (6, 2)
1982		32:30.8 (x,3)	2:26:11 (2, 1)
1983	8:53.49 (x, 6)		2:22:43' (2, 1)
1984	9:06.99i	32:07.41 (4,1)	2:24:52' (1, 1)

[I did not want to interview Joan Benoit. My editors, a merciless group of polyestered pixie patrons, made me do it. The press may indeed distort things, e.g., reality, but Benoit is, it seems, a true American hero. She is also a very private person, in an introspective sport, who has become world famous for the rather simple task of running. Interrogating Benoit reminds me somehow of building an 8-lane highway to a secret, special glen deep in the forest. To publicize is (at least an attempt) to change. Joan Benoit is fine just the way she is.]W]

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