

## **Never bet against Bernie**

**Roger Robinson**

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In April 1980 Bernie Portenski made a bet. She would quit smoking and drinking; and she would run a marathon. For a busy, party-loving, 30-year-old out-of-shape suburban hair-dresser, the odds against her looked long.

A year later she had won the bet, and changed her life.

In October 1998, Bernie (for Bernadine) Portenski set herself another triple challenge. She would run the world's fastest marathon by a woman aged 49; and she would do it, or go close, three times in successive weekends. Three 2:48 marathons in fifteen days, on opposite sides of the world, with 16,000 miles of travelling, two major changes of time zone and every spare day spent on her feet at her busy hair salon in Wellington, New Zealand. Again, long odds. But don't ever bet against Bernie.

"When you set a goal you've got to do it, haven't you?" she told me firmly the day after I had watched her in the second leg of this almost perverse treble, the New York City Marathon. Perhaps lulled by the warm Fall sunshine as we ate lunch on Broadway that mellow Monday, I had enquired if her Marathon Number 3, the obscure Canterbury Marathon in Christchurch, New Zealand, was really worth the effort. Was she not tempted to stay on and enjoy New York while her legs recovered?

But Bernie likes a purpose. She devours challenges like other people drink coffee. She's no mere marathon machine, and has a relish for running and for life that you hear in her hearty, husky post-race chuckle. But she never lets go on a goal.

"I didn't set out to do three races as such," she told me. "I just wanted to do each of them, and they all come in these two weeks. So then I thought I'd try to break Joyce Smith's record three times. That'd make a good story for you."

Bernie got the age-49 mark at the first attempt, powering round the Auckland, New Zealand, waterfront in 2:44:52. As she crossed the line, she punched the air with a fist in her trademark cycling glove.

"I was going to be in Auckland anyway to get an award at the Athlete-of-the-Year dinner, there was some prize-money, and a BMW to use for a year if the winner broke 2:42. I fancied that," she explained. "I did halfway in 1:20:40 but the wind got up in the second half and I was on my own. Still, 2:44's not bad for an old duck like me."

A week later the old duck was struggling over the Verrazano Narrows Bridge. The 2:44, or jet-lag, left its mark, even on Bernie's indefatigable body. When I saw her in Brooklyn, at 5 miles, she looked pale and lacklustre, for a woman known for the fire and steam-engine persistence of her running. By 8 miles, she had DNF on every struggling stride.

But, as I said, never bet against Bernie.

"My legs were on fire to start with," she told me on Broadway next day. "It was a fight from the start. I had toilet problems, so I got no warm-up and had to stop twice with diarrhoea, about where you saw me. But I knew it would come right. I loved the excitement, that sea of people over the bridge, and all the crowds and the views. It was the most exciting day of my life. I kept asking people where we were, but nobody around me seemed to speak English." The possibility that they might have been finding three-hour marathon speed too demanding for a chat about the view seems not to have crossed her mind.

She soon shrugged off her own ill effects in her usual matter-of-fact way.

"At halfway I set 3 hours as a goal. I'm always good on the last 10k. By the end I was running under 6:30 for each mile, and just getting better and better."

I can vouch for that. It was without much hope of seeing her that I waited at 23 miles, in Central Park, but suddenly there she was, the old Battling Bernie, thudding along, clawing her way up place by place - and even from the sidewalk you could see that every place mattered. She finished New York in 3:02:01, winning the 45-49 Masters age-group.

Her mind was already on Marathon Number 3, half a world away in six days' time.

"That's where I won this trip to New York, winning the Canterbury Marathon last year. I want to go back to show appreciation, and defend my title." You don't often hear that kind of old-fashioned gratitude in elite running circles, and I was not going to argue with it. She flew out of New York next day, worked three days in the salon and looked after daughter Marie-Jo, and in Christchurch ran 2:55, first woman as well as first Master.

Another goal fulfilled, another proof that she is no longer the smoking, drinking, hang-out-with-the-guys girl who took on that unlikely bet nineteen years ago.

It was her brother Terry and her then-husband Dick Portenski who accepted the bet that challenged her to give up her exuberant lifestyle. Her personality hasn't changed, but her focus has. Today she is probably New Zealand's most popular runner, with her tireless enthusiasm and commitment. The crowds cheer "Go, Bernie!" Nobody ever calls her anything else.

The early 1980s were the golden era of New Zealand women's running, the years of Allison Roe, Anne Audain, Diane Rodger and Lorraine Moller. Not the wildest gambler would have picked that the ungainly solidly-built novice jogger with the smoker's rasp would one day supplant them as the country's best. Yet when they had finished their glamour days, Bernie Portenski the over-40 hair stylist was setting world age records, representing New Zealand, winning major American and Australian races outright, being invited to the White House. You could own the Reserve Bank of New Zealand by now if you'd placed that bet in 1980.

Bernie had no glimpse of this future. She was too busy learning the basics. She found advice at the Wellington Marathon Clinic, a volunteer group that supports beginners preparing for their first marathon. Bernie is one of their proudest graduates. A year after Terry and Dick made the bet, she finished New Zealand's biggest marathon, at Rotorua, and, she says, "I got the marathon bug."

The bug bit so hard that she ran fifteen marathons in three years, all at full effort. She

still knows no other way to run. The times edged down towards three hours. Bernie's sister Michele Allison provided motivation, with a slight mix of sibling rivalry, and good company. Michele is still a frequent training partner and team-mate.

"My times came down first," says Michele. "But then I was having a baby so Bernie was the first under three hours." That milestone came in August 1984. The bug bit even harder.

Now Bernie diversified. As New Zealanders put it, she "joined harriers". That means a club, in her case a well-organised and historic one called Wellington Scottish, with its full weekly schedule of races - road, cross-country, team relays, always with inter-club rivalries adding to individual motivation. With Bernie and Michele, Scottish have one of New Zealand's top women's teams, especially in Masters. When I recently tried to interview Bernie at the finish-line of the New Zealand road championships, she kept disappearing to hug yet another sweaty finisher, all collapsing in an ever-increasing heap of yellow singlets while Bernie skipped round chortling "We won the team! We won the team! Good on yer, girls!" She never misses a local race or club event, however obscure. Maybe that loyalty restricts her international career, as it did at New York, but it is the root and soil of her personality.

For four years (1985-89) Bernie added triathlons. She became "dedicated to cross-training." And she continued to run "zillions of under 3-hour marathons." With experience and developing speed she moved into the elite range with a 2:40:47 in 1987. At age 39 she represented New Zealand, and did it again at 40, in the World Championship marathon in Milan.

In 1990 two other new experiences were added - she got injured and she got pregnant.

"The plantar fasciitis was maybe because of the running I did while pregnant. I ran 4:19:03 at Rotorua that year while four months pregnant. Orthotics fixed it, and my great year came in 1992."

That's when the big international Masters wins began. She came back strong after two quiet years, and could now leave little Marie-Jo for a week or two. Bernie Portenski joined Allison Roe and Lorraine Moller among the engraved winners' names on the Boston Marathon Memorial in Copley Square. She won the Masters at Australia's Gold Coast Marathon (1992, 2:37:38), Twin Cities (1992, 2:41:42), Boston (1993, 2:41:18), the Philadelphia Half-Marathon (1993, 1:16:42), Twin Cities again (1993, 2:41:25). The astonishing consistency of those times testifies to the solid strength of her running and her will-power.

She was left off the team for the 1992 Olympics because she was too old, they said, yet her recent times in the 2:37-2:41 range would have put her top ten in Barcelona, and she is famous for consistency in all weathers and on all courses.

It's a phenomenal record. The consistency is derived from a daily schedule that would put most people in a rest home. She runs 90-110 miles every week, including two interval sessions, one on the track. She puts in long hours at her Hair Salon ("long hair, perms and color specialists"). Her dedicated cross-training entails four swimming sessions a week, four on the exercycle and several of light weights. "On Sundays I do them all," she

says simply. She never forgets Marie-Jo, to whom she is solo parent since the marriage ended.

"She swims well now, so we can do the pool training together," Bernie says.

Even to see her in the salon makes you wonder at her stamina.

"She never stops," one customer told me. "She's doing hair, answering the phone, working the till, helping trainees, always on the move, on her feet. She gives time to Marie-Jo when she arrives from school, and the next work-out is never far away. She is driven, in the way many of us were in our twenties. The amazing thing is to see her keeping to that schedule at nearly fifty."

Marathons and hair-dressing are two tough worlds. Bernie Portenski has reached the top of both, but without losing her humanity. She is a fascinating mix of qualities. In a race she reminds you of a rugby forward charging for the goal-line, skittling rivals with every thump of her powerful thighs. The next day at the salon she is elegantly dressed, the frizzy hair blown out, the gracious businesswoman.

Determination is mixed with warmth, earthiness with elegance, toughness with generosity, even to her rivals ("Good on yer, Lee, you got me," she called to the winner who had outkicked her at the finish of the New Zealand road championships. "Too fast for me, girl!") The aggressive running, husky voice, no-nonsense honesty, and resilient femininity under stress, are a model you don't often find on the covers of running magazines.

After our lunch at Times Square she joined a group of other New Zealanders who had run the marathon the day before, eager to explore Manhattan, but all hobbled by sore legs and blisters; all except Bernie. As they limped away up Broadway, I could see her bouncing about in the midst of the group, girlish and enthusiastic in her tee-shirt and cycling shorts. I heard her husky chuckle rise above the snarling traffic. She found a new life in 1980, I thought; and she is still enjoying every moment of it.

Footnote, 2016: Bernie continued to enjoy it. She gave up the hair saloon, and worked privately for individual customers. When we had a friend dying of cancer who wanted her hair done, it was Bernie we called in. She broke record after record through her fifties and sixties. At 65, she added Ironman to her repertoire.

"I've never trained this hard," she told me in 2015. Now she faces the even greater challenge of cancer, and it looks bad. But I still wouldn't bet against her.