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Why Are American Women Running Faster Than Ever? We Asked Them — Hundreds of Them

By Talya Minsberg and Kevin Quealy Feb. 28, 2020

Jenn Ackerman and Tim Gruber for The New York Times

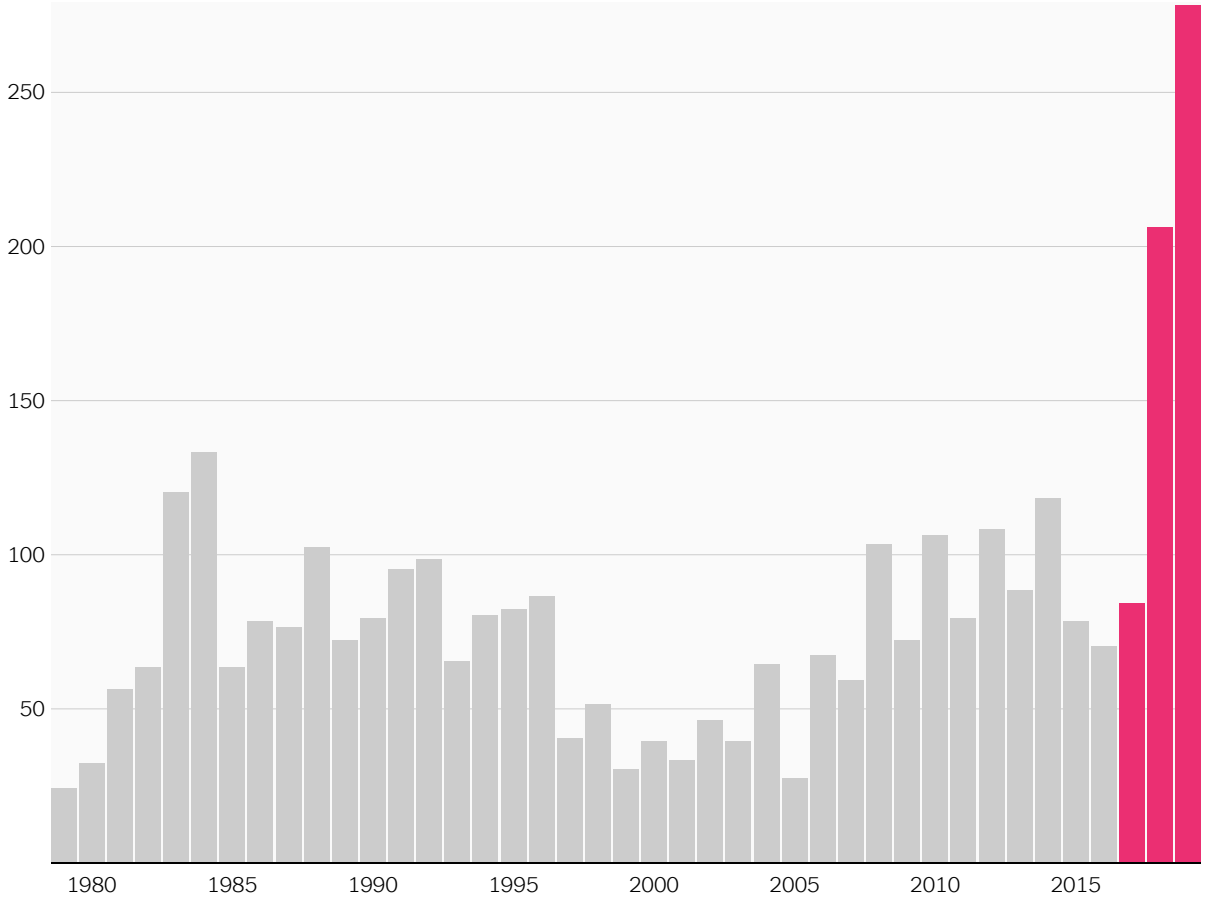
More than 450 women will race in the U.S. Olympic Trials marathon in Atlanta on Saturday. That's a huge number, reflecting changes in rules, innovative shoe technology and a sea change in women's running.

[We're following the Olympic Trials marathon live. Click here for updates from Atlanta]

Amateur women are running faster than ever, and, through communal networks online, showing others how to do so.

To qualify to race on Saturday, a woman had to complete a marathon in 2 hours 45 minutes or faster sometime in the last three years, roughly a pace of 6 minutes 17 seconds per mile.

U.S. women's marathons at 2:45 or faster



Athletes may have more than one OTQ result per year ▪ Sources: World Athletics, Association of Road Racing Statisticians

The women represent a range of backgrounds, and many have pushed themselves to results they once thought unachievable. We know this, because we talked to them — hundreds of them.

Megan Foster, 42

Runs 85 miles a week, mostly in New York's Central Park

Perry Shoemaker, 48

Started running competitively in her 40s

Not all the qualifiers shown here are racing Saturday. The runners supplied photographs of themselves.

Alongside the few dozen professional runners who are expected to compete for a spot on the Olympic team by finishing in the top three, there are hundreds of amateur runners from around the

country.

They are accountants and anesthesiologists, mothers and coaches, teachers and television producers. Some are participating in their first Olympic trials, and some in their fifth. Some are still in college. Some are in their mid- and even late 40s. At least one is still in high school. Many are pulling one another along with calls of “I did this, so you can, too.”

Allie Schaich, Starla Garcia, and Melissa Fairey warm up to train for the Women's Olympic Marathon Trials. Samantha Jane Beatty for the New York Times

Starla Garcia, a 30-year-old registered dietician in Houston, set a personal best at the California International Marathon in Sacramento in 2018, finishing in 2:53 – more than 20 minutes faster than her previous time. She figured that was about as fast as she could go. Then she heard another runner, **Carly Gill**, who ran 2:42 in Berlin in September, on the "Ali on the Run" podcast, and thought: "Why am I selling myself short? Why can't I believe in myself that much, too?"

It took her three marathons – and countless miles – to qualify. She first ran Grandma's Marathon in Duluth, Minn., in June 2019, and finished two minutes short of the qualifying standard. She then entered the California International Marathon in December, but did not finish. At the Houston Marathon last month, her last chance to qualify, she ran a 2:43:55 to make it to Atlanta.

Ms. Garcia makes breakfast after an early run. Samantha Jane Beatty for the New York Times

“What other times in my life am I going to have a pack of women around me pursuing the same goal?” she said, looking ahead to the trials.

Other qualifiers described their own paths to a qualification time.

Rena Elmer, a stay-at-home mother of nine children ages 14 months to 12 years, was once a standout in the steeplechase. She switched to the marathon because it was too hard to find track time after she and her family moved to the Dallas suburbs. Now she trains alone, mostly on a treadmill at a nearby Y.M.C.A., while her children are at school.

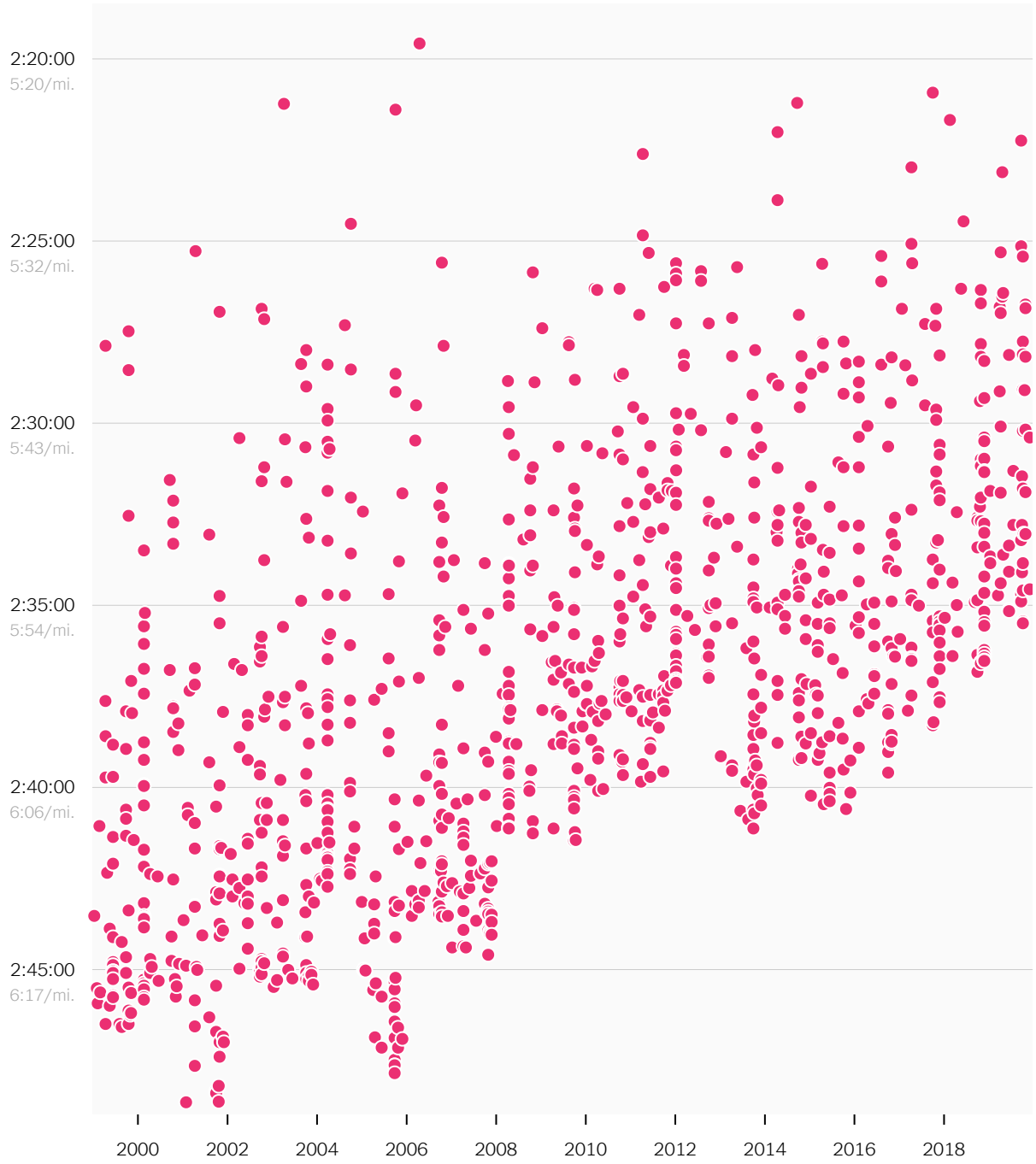
Courtney Olsen of Bellingham, Wash., presides over a local running club, using apps like Strava, Instagram and Facebook to keep her team connected and share workouts and training plans. Distance running has helped her overcome depression, she said.

Cailtin Kowalke of Cross Plains, Wis., hung up her running shoes after the 2016 Olympic trials. That didn’t last long. She decided to try qualifying for the 2020 trials, and ran a 2:43 marathon in 2018. She’ll be racing in Atlanta six months after giving birth to her daughter.

They will compete with a high school student from Minnesota; an Air Force first lieutenant from Colorado Springs; a college senior in Raleigh, N.C., who qualified on her first try; and a 48-year-old teacher from Northern Virginia.

All of them are part of a boomlet in female distance running that is distinct from the running booms of the past. The overall number of participants isn’t necessarily growing, as it did in the 1970s and 1980s and the early 2000s, but the fastest women are getting faster.

50 fastest U.S. women’s marathons per year



Source: World Athletics

‘You can’t be what you can’t see’

Decades ago, running was the ultimate individual pursuit, an activity immortalized in the 1959 short story “The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner.” Not anymore.

Each runner we talked to pointed to some form of the adage "you can't be what you can't see." About two-thirds of the women said they used social media apps like Instagram to connect with and follow other runners.

Keri McEntee, an occupational therapist in Fairbanks, Alaska, trains at an indoor track at a hockey arena when it's too cold to train outside. When she looks at fellow runners online, though, "it sparks this, 'Wow, if they can do it, I can do it,'" she said.

Obsie Birru of Phoenix, a 2:30 marathoner who works as an academic adviser, said she turned to social networks to find a community, since she does much of her training alone in the midday Arizona heat. "Instagram is where we share our struggles and successes," she said. "Oh, that was a rough workout; that was a great day – you see the nitty-gritty."

They pick up training tips and running routes, and track their peers' mileage and race performances. They become running partners in real life and encourage others from afar.

James McKirdy of McKirdy Trained, a coaching service based in Flagstaff, Ariz., worked with 14 athletes who qualified for the Olympic trials; 10 of them are women. He credits the sharp increase in fast women to online coaching services and the interconnectivity provided by Strava and Instagram.

"Our business would not really exist without the online apps that are out there right now," he said. "We didn't have the access 10 years ago that we do now."

He also cited the Shalane Flanagan Effect, noting how women, in particular, are pulling one another up to new levels of sub-elite running through communities found both online and in real life.

Training at John V. Lindsay East River Park track in Manhattan. Laurel Golio for The New York Times

“People are pushing each other to strive for bigger goals,” **Meghan Bishop**, a 34-year-old orthopedic sports medicine surgeon in New York City, said. The 2:42 marathoner always has a bag of running clothes with her so she can get her training in whenever possible. “Other athletes are seeing each other succeed and qualify,” she said. “If it’s something that you want bad enough, you’re going to make time for it.”

Staying competitive for longer

About one in five of the qualifiers we reached are older than 35, and about 1 in 13 are 40 or older. Their careers as sought-after college athletes might have ended years ago, but their competitive fire kept burning.

Ruth Morrey, a 44-year-old psychologist in Rochester, Minn., was a Division I soccer player; later, she qualified for and ran in the Olympic trials in 2000, then became a professional triathlete.

Jenn Ackerman and Tim Gruber for The New York Times

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She had three children, got a doctorate in psychology and retired as a pro triathlete in 2018. It wasn't long before she was thinking about another athletic goal. "More women are allowing themselves to have their own goals outside of their own families or careers," she said. "It's such a joyous experience."

Morrey had not run a marathon that was not part of a triathlon in more than 20 years, but she had run 26.2 miles in under three hours at the end of Ironman triathlons. "I think if we just get rid of 100 miles of biking and the swim, I think I could do it," she recalled thinking. She qualified — with a 2:43:41. "I love that I was able to have an opportunity to see what a 44-year-old can do."

About one in four of the runners we reached have children. Many describe a kinship and inspiration found between other mothers lining up in Atlanta.

"There are just so many women who would love to be in my shoes, and I want to go compete for them and the other moms out there," Kowalke said. She'll be lining up in Atlanta for the first time as a

new mother. “I would say that we are all competing against each other, but on the flip side of that, we are all competing for each other as women, and I think that’s really special.”

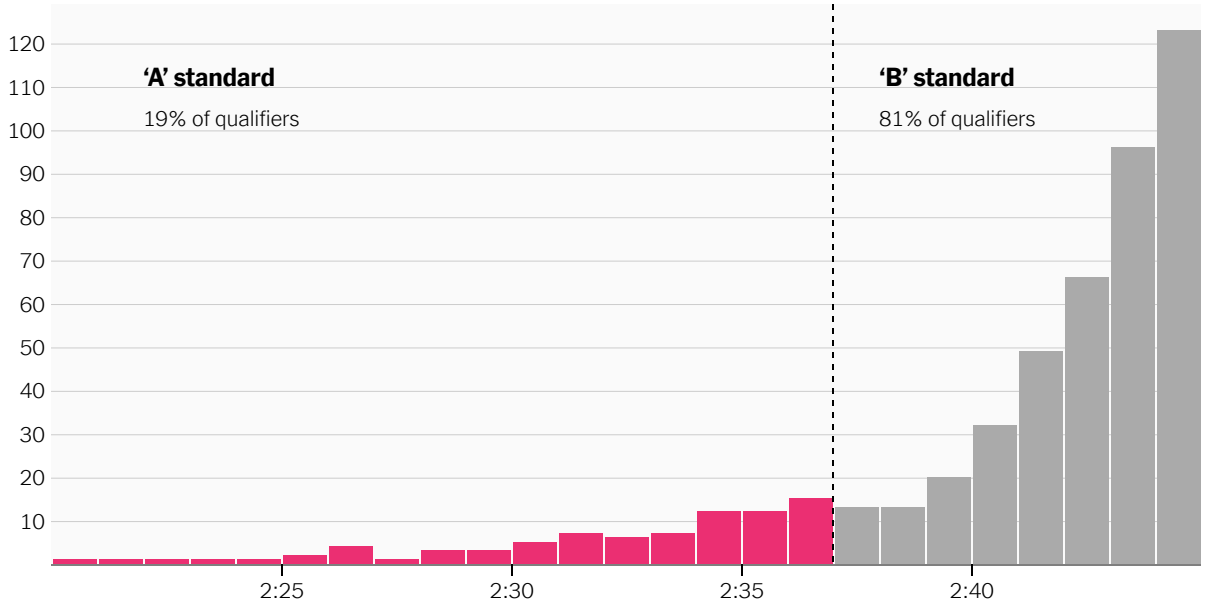
Shoes and standards

Two recent structural changes across the sport have also played a role in the record size of this year’s field.

The first is that to encourage participation the qualifying standard for the full cycle ahead of the 2020 Olympics Trials Marathon was 2:45. The standard had been relaxed from 2:43 just ahead of the 2016 Trials Marathon. (World Athletics had relaxed its qualifying standard for 2016 Olympics for the same reason.)

About 80 percent of the runners who qualified for the trials in Atlanta did so with a time between 2:37 and 2:45, known as the ‘B’ qualifying standard. It’s possible that women were newly motivated to attempt the qualifying standard, believing it was now within reach. Many expect the standard to be lowered once again for the 2024 Olympics trials. The number of women who have run below 2:37 has also risen sharply in recent years.

Distribution of marathon qualification times



The second structural change is shoes. Advancements in shoe technology — in particular, in a line of Nike shoes called the Vaporfly 4% and the Vaporfly Next% — have become an explosive issue among runners, as professional and amateur racers alike debate whether the shoes save so much energy that they amount to an unfair advantage.

These shoes are omnipresent on the starting lines of major races, and they are likely to be worn by a huge share of the field in Atlanta. (A Times analysis of race data from more than a million marathons and half marathons found that the shoes did bestow a significant advantage, probably worth at least a minute or two for most runners at that speed.)

Generational change

Garcia described this field in generational terms, calling the ability of women to train and dedicate time to such goals as a luxury. “I honestly think that this is one of the first generations because that has been given these kinds of opportunities,” Garcia said. “I think it’s just followed a whole social and cultural shift in the U.S.”

The women's running boomlet comes at a time of change and tumult in women's athletics. After the U.S. women's soccer team won the World Cup last year, thousands in the stadium celebrated by chanting "Equal Pay" – a reference to a lawsuit still in court. The W.N.B.A. and its players' union agreed on a collective-bargaining agreement that would nearly double the maximum salary and provide paid maternity leave.

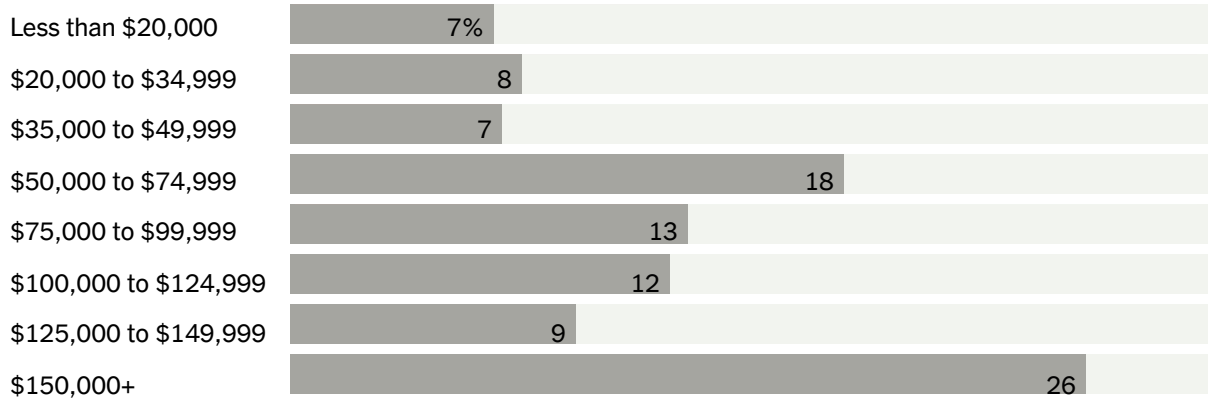
It's becoming more of a norm to see female athletes at the highest levels train through pregnancy and return to the field of play soon after giving birth. It was only last year that Nike announced a new maternity policy for all sponsored athletes following the publication of a series of videos and articles by The New York Times Opinion section.

"It's the power of communal persistence," Garcia continued. "How awesome is it that we are almost given our own day to run around the city of Atlanta in sports bras, buns and tiny shorts to show how strong a community of women can be?"

About the runners

Below, aggregate information about the runners who completed our survey.

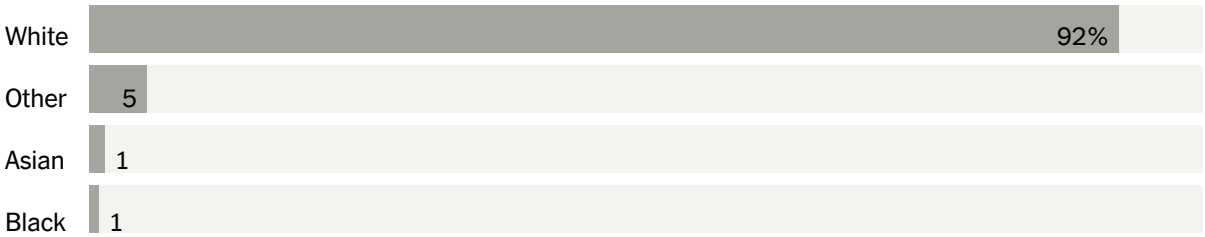
Income



Nearly half the respondents reported having a family income of more than $100,000 per year, and about one in four reported incomes at $150,000 or higher.

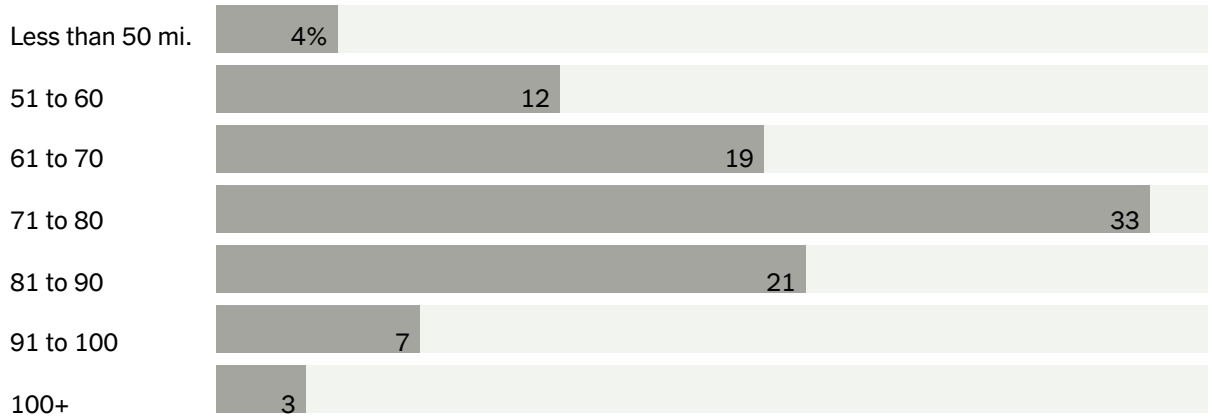
Marathon training demands time — there's no way to avoid the number of hours needed for long runs, threshold runs, speed workouts, cross training and recovery. Women with higher-paying, salaried jobs are also more likely than low earners to have flexibility in their work hours, so they can more easily work around their training schedule.

Race



Most obvious to anyone who watches the race: An overwhelming share, more than 90 percent, of the runners are white. As Runner's World described it in 2011, the lack of African-American participation in distance running is a result of few role models as well as "ingrained stereotypes (of both black and white runners), institutional complacency and cultural resistance." Since then, the sport has gotten somewhat more diverse at the recreational level, with the growth of teams such as Black Girls Run and Black Men Run. But the elite field in the U.S. remains overwhelmingly white.

Weekly Training Mileage



Most runners who qualified for the trials ran about 75 per week.

Kathleen A. Flynn contributed reporting; additional work by K.K. Rebecca Lai