

Running in Jackie's Shadow

He was born in a rural southern town on Jan. 31, 1919; a time when the Civil War was still a living memory and segregation was the law.

He transcended the prejudices of his day, attending college and serving his country during World War II.

He was a champion, a pioneer and a role model for other African-Americans.

Ted Corbitt, 78, has much in common with the late Jackie Robinson, not the least of which is that he, too, transformed his sport. The running boom owes much to the 78-year-old Manhattan resident, a man often described as "the father of long distance running."

The similarities between Corbitt and Robinson are striking: They were born on the same day, just a few hundred miles apart — Robinson in Cairo, Ga., Corbitt in Dunbarton, S.C.. They were both college-educated, uncommon for African-American men of that era. While Robinson was being court-martialed for a courageous act of defiance during World War II, Corbitt was being trained for the invasion of Japan. In August, 1945, he was on a troopship in the Caroline Islands, when the A-Bomb ended the war. "I feel like I've been living on borrowed time ever since," Corbitt said. "I probably would have been killed in that invasion."

Although he never met Robinson, Corbitt had heard of him long before his major league debut in April, 1947. "I knew him primarily as a football player and track runner," Corbitt said. "There were better [baseball] players in the Negro Leagues. I'd seen many of them play. But he certainly had a great impact."

While Robinson endured and flourished in the big leagues, Corbitt ran, despite being barred from many meets because he was black. Corbitt ran, despite a "horrible" performance in the 1952 Olymp-

pic marathon in Helsinki. Corbitt ran, despite being stopped more than 200 times by police, who weren't used to seeing an African-American man running through the streets of New York City.

Like Robinson, he turned the other cheek. "They were just doing their jobs," he said.

Corbitt ran and ran; he set national records at distances of 25, 40 and 50 miles, competed in the Pan Am Games, became only the second man to run 100 marathons, and in 1958, helped organize a group of weekend running buddies into the New York Road Runners Club. Corbitt was the club's first president and edited its first newsletter. He helped organize the first national standards committee for course measurement. In the process, he helped create one of the most democratic sports movements in American history.

"Everyone's heard of Fred Lebow," said Rich Innamorato of the Broadway Ultra Society. "But there wouldn't have been a Fred Lebow without Ted Corbitt. It's sad that most new runners never even heard of him."

They should know Corbitt, and they should hear what he has to say about what happened in this country since his peer, Jackie Robinson, came to bat in Brooklyn 50 years ago. "Some people say there hasn't been any change," said Corbitt, whose grandparents were slaves. "But they're either blind or ignorant. This is a different world altogether."

On the roads

Alan Wells of Manhattan passed Selvin Cruz of Far Rockaway 200 yards from the finish line of Sunday's Parkway Foundation 5K in Forest Hills. Wells finished in 16:11. Cruz, a sophomore at Hunter College, was second in 16:14. The women's winner was Ellen Brach, 31, of Bellmore in 18:43 . . . Teams from the Central Massachusetts Striders, Millrose AA and the Peconic Road Runners, plus individual masters runners from as far away as New Mexico, are registered for Saturday's Nationwide Insurance 10K Run For Aspire, the site of this year's USATF national masters championship. The race gets started at 9-a.m.; at the H.B. Mattlin School, Washington Avenue in Plainview. For information, call (516) 433-0919.

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