

The Quiet Revolutionary

A tribute to the life and legacy of distance running pioneer Ted Corbitt

by Sabrina Tillman

Ted Corbitt—runner, Olympian, master physical therapist, husband, father, icon, harbinger of change—will forever be regarded as one of the pioneers of the sport of distance running. Corbitt pushed the boundaries of the sport in countless ways: In his 88 years, he ran 199 marathons and ultramarathons, winning 30 of those races and setting numerous records. As the first president of New York Road Runners, Corbitt changed the sport at the local and national level. “Ted was a quiet yet tremendous force at NYRR and in our sport,” says Mary Wittenberg, NYRR president and CEO. “As pioneer, leader, and our first president, he set the tone

and tempo of making a positive difference for so many that we continue to promote today.”

The Endurance Master

As a child on his family’s farm in Dunbarton, South Carolina, Corbitt ran to school, the store, and the mailbox. He ran track in high school and at the University of Cincinnati, where segregation rules occasionally prevented him from competing. He served in the army during World War II, then married Ruth Butler, who remained his partner for 42 years; they had one child, Gary.

Ever the experimenter, Corbitt trained for his first marathon, the 1951 Boston Marathon, to see if he could

endure the distance. Few training resources existed at the time, so Corbitt adapted Czech Olympian and world record-holder Emil Zátopek’s training regimen to create his own program that included resistance exercises, progressive mileage (up to a 30-mile run), and speed workouts. Corbitt would run in heavy combat boots that blistered his feet because he hypothesized that it would make him stronger. His 2:48:42 marathon debut earned Corbitt 15th place in Boston that year.

One year later, Corbitt competed in the Olympic marathon in Helsinki, Finland, and although he finished a disappointing 44th, he was hooked. By the end of 1954, Corbitt had run

Ted Corbitt: Mile Markers



1919

Born in Dunbarton, South Carolina



1944

Served in the U.S. Army, World War II

Married Ruth Butler

1942

Graduated from the University of Cincinnati



1947

Joined New York Pioneer Club

Began 44-year career as a physical therapist for the Institute for the Crippled and Disabled

1949

Earned master’s degree in physical therapy from New York University

Photography by Enquirer/Gary Landers, Ken Levinson, and courtesy of Gary Corbitt

14 marathons; he finished among the top 20 in 13 of them, won his first title at the Shanahan Marathon, and earned the national marathon crown at the championship race in Yonkers. Four years later at the Shanahan Marathon, Corbitt set his personal record, 2:26:44.

The Unrelenting Purist

After conquering the marathon distance, Corbitt was ready for a new competitive challenge. In 1959, he helped organize New York's first ultramarathon, the New York Road Runners Club (NYRRC) 30-Mile Run, along the same course in the Bronx as the Cherry Tree Marathon (plus four miles). Ultramarathons suited Corbitt's sensibilities perfectly. "Ultrarunners require a mental maturity and focus," says Betsy McGee, Corbitt's close friend and an ultramarathon organizer. "Many ultras are run along trails, in forests, or on mountain terrain, and if you let your mind wander, you could get lost. There is also a physiological difference in the body when you run at night, and it requires extra concentration

just to keep the eyes open and the body moving."

Three separate 20-milers in one day, 300-mile weeks, training culminating in "Hell Week" (seven days of consecutive long runs and workouts, often completed twice or thrice daily), running to-and-from work, loops around Manhattan Island and Westchester

person on the planet."

"He wasn't a cheerleader for the sport—he was a very serious athlete," says McGee. "He was always willing to go down in flames to beat the guy in front of him, and that's what makes a competitor." Although Corbitt was best known for feats of ultradistance running, Gary Corbitt says that the

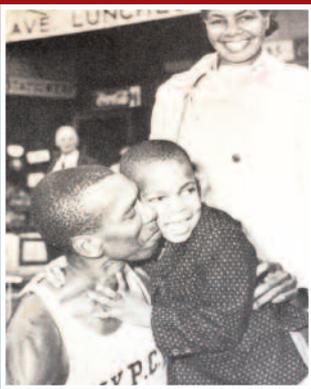
"He was always willing to go down in flames to beat the guy in front of him, and that's what makes a competitor."

—Betsy McGee

County—welcome to the training log of Ted Corbitt. "Those of us who knew Ted back then talked about his training runs—the 200 miles a week. The time he ran 70 miles a day, three days in a row in [heat] over 90 degrees," said George Hirsch, chairman of the NYRR board of directors, at the Runner's World 2007 Heroes of Running awards ceremony, where Corbitt was honored. "He logged over 200,000 miles, widely believed to be more than any other

relatively short 30K was his dad's favorite distance. "I don't think people have a clue about his speed at shorter distances—he was very fast for all distances."

Corbitt learned through experience. "I had successes, but mistakes and failing to master the art of tapering off between training and races all affected race results," he said when accepting his Heroes of Running Award. "I knew I didn't have to run as much as I did to



1951

Son Gary born; shown here with Ruth in 1956

Ran first marathon in Boston



1952

Became the first African American to represent the USA in the marathon; competed in the Olympic Games in Helsinki, Finland

1954

Won USA National Marathon Championship at Yonkers in 2:46:13

First marathon victory, Shanahan Marathon (2:36:06)

1956

Won national 30K championship

Was the first alternate for the U.S. Olympic marathon team



1957

Won national 30K championship

1958

Became first president of New York Road Runners

1958

Established quarterly NYRR newsletter

Set marathon PR, 2:26:44

Began teaching physical therapy classes at Columbia University

reach the same level of performance, but you have to go through a lot to discover what the possibilities are.”

Corbitt maintained his rigorous schedule until a diagnosis of bronchial asthma at age 54 ended his competitive running career. He continued to participate in events, though, and embraced walking.

The Open-Minded Healer

Off the roads, Corbitt was revered as a physical therapist. In 1949, he began a 44-year career at the Institute for the Crippled and Disabled (ICD) in Manhattan, and he earned a master’s degree in physical therapy from New York University the following year.

Corbitt’s philosophies on healing resembled his running method—he approached both with an open mind. “Ted would say, ‘if it works for you, keep using it, if not, go back to the drawing board,’” says Corbitt’s protégé, Jack Mantione, doctor of physical therapy. “His message to me was everything is relative—the same medical and fitness technique,

running style, and so on, doesn’t work for everyone. Keep an open mind, keep learning, and improve on what you know.”

“I don’t think people have a clue about his speed at shorter distances—he was very fast for all distances.”

—Gary Corbitt

Corbitt approached the body holistically with the goal of achieving balance. He combined massage with progressive training, moderate resistance training, stretching, proper nutrition and hydration, efficient running form, and proper rest and recovery to produce the most well-trained, injury-free athlete possible.

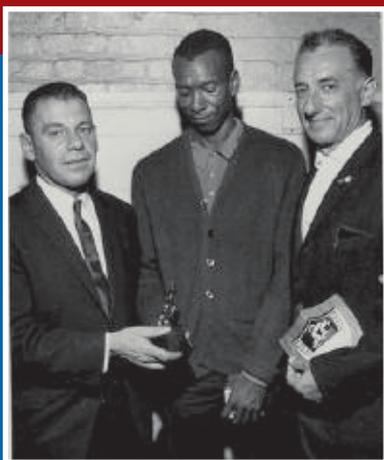
The Quiet Leader

How did one man who was famously quiet and humble, and who spent countless hours training in solitude, touch the lives of so many? Corbitt inspired because he *was* inspired; he was motivated by his passion for running and his desire to give back.

Although apprehensive about the time commitment, Corbitt allowed his peers to convince him to become the first president of NYRR in 1958. He founded

the quarterly club newsletter (which evolved into *New York Runner*) and served as its chief editor for 20 years. In 1960, Corbitt became the third president of the Road Runners Club of America (RRCA) and started a national club newsletter. “I spent years doing administrative stuff in the background to help our sport survive and grow,” Corbitt said. “I didn’t want to do a lot of this stuff, but it needed to be done and I did it.”

While he was RRCA president, Corbitt wanted to start a coastal marathon competition that would match the times of East Coast runners against those on the West Coast. He soon found that times on different



1959

Organized, ran, and won the first NYRR 30-Mile Run (3:04:13)

1960

Became third president of Road Runners Club of America; shown here in 1962 with RRCA members Kurt Steiner, left, and Aldo Scandurra

1960

Co-authored a book on hydrotherapy

1962

Ran first of five London-to-Brighton 52-mile road races

1965

Became first chairman of the National AAU Standards Committee, which certified accurate road race courses

1966

Set USA record for 50 miles on the track

1964

Wrote Measuring Road Running Courses

1968

Won national 50-mile championship

courses couldn't be compared due to a lack of measurement standards. This sparked a new mission for Corbitt—one that would become his greatest contribution to the sport. He compiled data and analysis on the various methods of course measurement and published *Measuring Road Running Courses* (1964; Road Runners Club, USA), which gave rise to the RRCA's course certification program. In 1965, Corbitt became the first chairman of the National AAU Standards Committee, which was tasked with the promotion of accurate road course measurement.

American bicentennial; Lebow and his team pulled it off. Other ideas also encountered resistance: Despite disapproval from the AAU, Corbitt led NYRR to sponsor races for runners over the age of 40. In *Corbitt: The Story of Ted Corbitt, Long Distance Runner* (1974; Track & Field News), author John Chodes writes, "AAU officials were stunned when veterans outperformed the under-19 juniors. As the concept grew, hundreds of runners came out of retirement, and many novices took up competing, anxious to prove that 40 wasn't over the hill."

training runs by suspicious police officers, but he didn't protest; he accepted things as they were and maintained hope that times would change. "My father was a runner to see what he could do in the sport and not to break any racial barriers," says Gary Corbitt. But the more Corbitt achieved, the more he redefined the limits of what was thought possible. Without intention, he became a role model for underrepresented ethnic, age, and gender groups in the sport of running and beyond.

"Ted reached self-actualization and he did it through his running. He didn't have a goal—that's why he didn't have any boundaries."

—Jack Mantione

In 1975, Corbitt suggested that NYRR president Fred Lebow expand the New York City Marathon out of Central Park and into the five boroughs as a way to commemorate the

Corbitt's style of leading by example paved the way not only for older runners, but also for women and ethnic minorities in the sport. Corbitt was stopped hundreds of times during

The Legacy of a Legend

Corbitt quietly paved the road for posterity with his singular style. "The Japanese call it *satori*, which means to just be, to live in the moment, and Ted embodied that," says Mantione. "He learned how to put his ego in his pocket. Ted reached self-actualization and he did it through his running. He didn't have a goal—that's why he didn't have any boundaries."

If Corbitt's achievements earned him respect, his character brought him



1969
Set USA record for 100 miles on the track

1973
Set USA record for 24 hours on the track (134.7 miles); shown here competing in the Ted Corbitt 24 Hour Race.

1975
Suggested to Fred Lebow the concept of an NYC five-borough road race

1978
Recipient of the first Abebe Bikila Award



1983
Celebrated 25th anniversary of NYRR with Fred Lebow

1990
Founding of the Ted Corbitt Memorial Award, awarded by USA Track & Field to honor the male ultrarunner of the year

followers. “He was more effective as a quiet activist than anyone I know, and he did that in a scholarly, gentlemanly manner—he did it in a very masterful way,” says McGee. In his later years, Corbitt worked with McGee to help grow the sport of ultramarathoning, and he included her in his mission to

Corbitt has inspired and guided numerous athletes and others, including his son. Gary, a marathon runner who is preparing to run Boston this year in honor of his father, reveals that his dad “never really pushed me to run; he pushed education.” Gary, now the research director of Nielsen ratings

his son Gary’s may be to preserve this example to remind us just how far two feet can travel. ■

Ted Corbitt died of respiratory failure (he also had prostate and colon cancer) on December 12, 2007. His wife, Ruth Butler Corbitt, died in 1989. He is survived by his son, Gary Corbitt, of Jacksonville, Florida.

“You have to go through a lot to discover what the possibilities are.”

—Ted Corbitt

get the ultra into the Olympics. McGee recalls attending a *Runner’s World* event with Corbitt where he told them he would attend if given the opportunity to announce the Olympic ultra project. “He used his statesmanship to his advantage, and he was full of mischief too,” recalls McGee, laughing. Corbitt sat in the back at the event, eyes closed, forcing McGee to be the spokesperson. McGee now organizes ultras and training camps around the world, including the Verbier Ultra Run in Verbier, Switzerland.

for a television station in Florida, has established the Ted Corbitt Archives project. “I want to preserve my father’s legacy and preserve the history of the sport,” he says. “I’m being told that a lot of people don’t care about the history of the sport, and I would like to change that.”

Ted Corbitt was motivated by scientific curiosity to redefine what was considered humanly possible. His footprints have made a tremendous impact on the sport, and if Ted Corbitt’s legacy was to inspire by example, then

Ted Corbitt Archives Project

The Ted Corbitt Archives will be a multimedia tribute to the life and contributions of Ted Corbitt and other leaders, and an historical record of the sport of long distance running. If you have something to contribute, submit materials to:

Ted Corbitt Archives
P.O. Box 23132
Jacksonville, FL 32241
corbittg@comcast.net



1993

Retired from the Institute for the Crippled and Disabled, but continued to treat patients

1998

Inducted into the inaugural class at the Distance Running Hall of Fame

2002

Set world age record of 303 miles in a six-day race; shown here greeting runners after their 100-mile run.

2003

Walked 68.7 miles in 24 hours

2006

Inducted into inaugural class at the American Ultrarunning Hall of Fame

2007

*Honored as one of the Heroes of Running, Runner’s World
Died on December 12 in Houston, Texas*