

The Ted Corbitt Legacy

Preserving Corbitt's collection on the sport of running.

BY GAIL KISLEVITZ

When Ted Corbitt died on December 12, 2007, he left behind not only a legacy of distance running, course-certification standards, and pioneering techniques in physical therapy, he also left a virtual history of the sport of running kept in crumpled boxes, stored on tapes, and scattered about the 1,200-square-foot apartment in upper Manhattan where he lived for more than 37 years. His only child, Gary, was left with the daunting and compelling task of sorting through the contents of the apartment and deciding what to do with the wealth of information Ted had accrued during his lifetime. Gary had an idea of the task he faced but was overwhelmed with what he found. "I knew my father saved everything, but I didn't realize he kept everything in duplicate," said Gary, who lives in Jacksonville, Florida. "The historical depth and volume of his collection are beyond what I imagined."

Entering the apartment after his death was eerie. There was a stillness to the place, as if the walls and trophies and books knew that the gentle, kind man who inhabited the rooms and quietly went about his way was

► The author, Gail Kislevitz, and Gary Corbitt, Ted's only child, undertook a daunting 18-month project to sort through Ted's Manhattan apartment and decide what to do with the treasures found in every closet, drawer, nook, and cupboard.



gone. Gary and I started opening closet doors, finding hundreds of weathered-with-age cardboard boxes that became an 18-month project. Ted's 1952 Olympic uniform, both the marathon singlet and the opening-ceremony blue jacket, pants, and white buckskin shoes, hung in the back of the closet as if Ted had worn them just the day before. In the bedroom dresser drawer were numerous gold watches that Ted won in the '60s. One particular watch from the Philadelphia Marathon was presented to Ted by Jack Kelly, father of Grace Kelly. Mr. Kelly, a sports aficionado, supported many of the road races.

Poking through more drawers, Gary found the bride-and-groom figurine that was on his parent's wedding cake, as well as his mother's purse, which prompted an emotional moment. Ruth Corbitt died in 1989. As we continued opening drawers and boxes, we got lost in our own memories of Ted and got very little done. We realized that we needed to focus on the task at hand and not get caught up in reverie, so we split the tasks and buckled down to work.

Like an archeologist

I have seen documentaries on how archeologists enter the tombs of the great pharaohs and marvel at the artifacts they found, still intact. That's what it felt like to sort through the treasures we found in every closet, drawer, nook, and cupboard of the apartment. I had interviewed Ted numerous times in this apartment and was always in awe at the historical clutter. Like a kid in a candy shop, I wanted to touch every trophy and have Ted tell me the story behind it. He always sat in the same chair in the corner of the living room, surrounded by his prized possessions: trophies lined up on top of bookcases swollen to the point of collapsing; family photos dating back to his ancestral home in Dunbarton, South Carolina; a treadmill, broken from an overdose of miles; a desk piled high with yellowed pamphlets and magazines. The space was so cramped that there was no room to move. But Ted was content and happy; this was his world.

To be a part of this undertaking was, for me, an honor. It's hard to describe what it felt like to hold the brittle-to-the-point-of-breaking front page of the 1957 *Boston Globe* announcing John J. Kelley as the winner of the Boston Marathon or watching a home videotape of the 1960 U.S. Olympic track and field team practicing at Van Cortlandt Park. I felt as if I had been transported back in time to an era when road racing was dominated by a close community of men and a few women who gave their all for the sport they loved. They never earned a dime, always ran to win, and held down full-time jobs, and most had families. They were driven and they were passionate.

The first thing I noticed sorting through the newspaper clippings was the extent of press coverage given to road racing in the 1980s. It was much more than we see today. The former *New York Tribune* dedicated two to three full pages to local

weekend races. There was a column just for female runners, the “Avon Running Spotlight.” In 1980, the height of the running boom, the *Daily News* printed a full-page article by William Kutik titled, “Does Running Run Your Life?” with a quiz to test your running addiction. Articles of more important historical findings were also uncovered, such as the *Boston Globe* article of May 24, 1960, titled, “Olympic Brass Deserves Gold Medal for Brains.” The article describes how the Olympic Committee changed its rules to allow John Kelley the Younger to compete on the 1960 Olympic Marathon team.

Boston and Yonkers marathons Olympic qualifiers

To qualify for the Olympic Marathon team in 1960, runners had to compete in the Boston Marathon in April and then the Yonkers Marathon one month later. In the 1950s and '60s, Kelley was the undisputed finest marathoner in the country. But in the 1960 Boston Marathon Olympic qualifier, he was sidelined with a blister (he ran in new shoes) and didn't finish. Three weeks later he smashed the national marathon record at Yonkers in 2:20 but was ineligible for a spot on the Olympic marathon team due to his derailed Boston Marathon. In the article, Jock Semple, the legendary Boston Marathon race director and close friend of Kelley, stated, “Kelley has not been chosen yet for the team but the Olympic committee is very impressed with his recent triumph at Yonkers. His Boston Marathon should be ignored. He is the best marathoner we have.” Kelley was filled with angst over the commotion: “I don't want the rules changed for me. It has been stipulated that both the B.A.A. Marathon and Yonkers would be the two qualifying races to determine the Olympic squad. I'm concerned over what people will say if I am chosen.” John Kelley the Elder, 52 at the time, chimed in as well: “Young John should race at Rome. He is the best marathoner in this country—bar none.” Kelley did go to Rome and was the first American finisher.

Reached at his home in Mystic, Connecticut, Kelley reflects on that Olympic decision. “I was ready to retire after that miserable Boston. I should have known better than to wear new shoes, but they were custom made. I ended up with blisters



► Ted's New York Pioneer Club singlet, possibly his first, most likely dating back to the late 1940s.

Printer: Insert Philadelphia Marathon ad

at mile two.” Three weeks later he set the national record at Yonkers, and the Olympic Committee was ready to grant him the berth to Rome. But Kelley, always fair minded, felt the spot should go to Bob Cons, of California, who had won the third position on the team. They decided to hold a runoff at a 25K race in New York City. Whoever won would go to Rome. Kelley won but was still filled with angst over the fact that Cons would be eliminated from the team. It was finally decided that Cons would go to Rome as the fourth member, just in case someone got sick and couldn’t compete.

There was a 1983 article in the *News World* stating that the Boston Marathon would not give in to pressure from the press to switch the marathon from Monday to Sunday. The B.A.A. turned down substantial television income to keep the race on the traditional Patriots’ Day Monday. That year the entry fee was raised to \$10 from \$5.

Nina Kuscsik, a close friend of Ted’s and in 1972 the first woman to officially win the Boston Marathon, recalls attending the Yonkers Marathon during the ’60s and waiting for her friend to cross the finish line. “It was always hot at Yonkers, and there weren’t any water stops back then. One year I brought some cloth diapers and a tub of ice water. I soaked the diapers in the ice water and handed them out to the runners at the halfway mark so they could cool down.”

Course certificate papers

Ted was always concerned about the accuracy of racecourses. In 1964, he proposed a program of promoting more accurate road-race courses in America. The RRCA adopted the proposal and formed the National AAU Standards Committee, which was charged with promotion of accurate road-course measurement. Ted was its first chairman and held that position for more than 15 years.

Gary knew that the boxes containing the course-measurement materials would be the most challenging to sort through. He recruited Jim Gerweck, Western Vice-Chairman for the USATF Road Running Technical Council, the body that carries on Ted’s work in course certification, to help out. As Gerweck sorted through the stack of envelopes in the 28 boxes of course-measurement materials, he saw that the one on top bore a familiar return address: “It was my own address, from when I was living at my parents’ house in the early ’80s. In the letter inside, I asked Ted for advice on how to become involved in the course-certification process, etc. It is ironic that some three decades later I have continued my involvement in this area and am holding this letter in my hand.”

Ted kept every piece of correspondence with a measurer for each course (in the early days of course certification, Ted was the sole authority for issuing certifications; now each state has its own certifier). The boxes contained actual certifications, but there were other publications and correspondence as well. Several



▲ Ted's dear friend and ultramarathon racing partner Rich Innamorato pours through treasures at the apartment. Rich was the only person that Gary trusted with decisions regarding Ted's medals and trophies.

were devoted to trying to determine a device that could be easily calibrated to measure courses with a high degree of accuracy and precision. Alan Jones later invented the Jones counter to do just that.

Among the course certifications were several from races that have become significant in the running world. The first five-borough New York City Marathon is perhaps foremost among these, but there were many others.

Gerweck didn't meet Ted until 1999, when he was at the Distance Running Hall of Fame booth at the New York City Marathon expo. Recalls Gerweck: "He, I, and British measurer Hugh Jones spent an enjoyable hour talking about running in general and course measurement in specific. Ted was probably in his late 70s at that point, but he had a vitality and grace about him that made him instantly likable and memorable. Every time one of us goes out to measure a course, we feel that Ted is riding along with us, making sure we don't make any mistakes."

Discrimination in the background

The newspaper articles also disclosed discrimination toward African American athletes. In a 1958 article in the *Jersey Journal*, two full pages were dedicated to

the International Trade Marathon that started in Hoboken and finished in Journal Square. Kelley the Younger placed first, Bob Carmen placed second, and Corbitt placed third. Photos of Kelley, Carmen, and the fourth-place finisher, Billy Smith of Canada, filled the pages. Not one photo of Ted or even a mention of his third-place finish is in the article. Ted never talked about his years of being discriminated against, but they left their mark. In a letter dated in 1965, Corbitt applied to a physical therapy course at the University of North Carolina. In the letter he states the following:

“I am submitting an application for entry into the course: Neurophysiology in the Treatment of Neuromuscular Dysfunction. I have had some interest in this course or in studying with Miss Hood for some time but circumstances prevented attendance to date. In connection with this application, this next point must be made: I am a Negro, and since I do not know what the admission policy of the University of North Carolina is, I must mention this now.”

He was accepted.

Although he remained silent about the years he suffered through discrimination, it was never far from his thoughts. At the bottom of one of the boxes was a folder marked, “How to Get Arrested Safely.” It contained news clippings of young black men who had been arrested on false charges and a handwritten note by Ted that read, “Even Jesus Christ was arrested on false charges.” Gary explained that his dad was preparing to write a book about discrimination against black men by the New York City police during the 1980s.

Training logs that would make many a runner weep

Corbitt’s training logs and diaries were at the bottom of one of the storage boxes. Gary was very familiar with the training logs and as a youngster read them as other children read comic books. Corbitt’s diaries revealed his disappointment in not making another Olympic marathon team after his disappointing finish at the 1952 Helsinki marathon. In 1956, he missed the team by one spot. In 1960, he missed qualifying again due to a sprained ankle. In his diaries, he analyzed his races mile by mile and wrote detailed accounts of where he went wrong and where he could have made up time. In his acceptance speech for his Lifetime Achievement Award from *Runner’s World* just before his death, he said: “I had successes, but mistakes as well, and failing to master the art of tapering between killer training and races, and Lady Luck, all affected race results.”

The training-log entries are made in blue ink in tiny, meticulous handwriting. He colored certain days in red, which Gary remembers as being significant, such as a record high-mileage day, a PR on a training course, or a record-mileage week or month. One entry, written when Ted was 54, read: “Sept, 1973: Started the day by measuring a calibration course in Central Park, then took the bus to Vermont

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for a 50K. Took 9th place. Rode the bus home.” Another entry for the month of August that same year: “Total mileage for the month, 817. Took four days off.”

Physical therapy legacy

Ted is remembered as much for his advancements in the field of physical therapy as he is for running. We found hundreds of books on subjects ranging from anatomy to ballet to acupuncture and applied kinesiology. His passion for his profession went as deep as his passion for running. If he couldn't find a book on a particular topic, he conducted his own research and then wrote the book. When he couldn't find drawings of specific parts of the body, he drew his own. Gary found a fragile, folded sheet of paper that, when unfolded, displayed a 6-foot drawing of a human body with all the muscles and connective tissue labeled in Ted's handwriting.

Jack Mantione, a physical therapist who practices at Integrative Physical Therapy Practice in New York City, studied with Ted for years and now has his books and private collection of papers. “What makes this information invaluable is the enormous amount of resources that Ted drew from all over the world,” says Mantione. Gary remembers his father flying to Germany in 1956 to study connective tissue massage. He traveled to universities and hospitals to study techniques not yet available in the United States to treat patients. “Ted sought opinions about every area of physiotherapy from the most advanced to the least,” said Mantione. “He always believed you could learn something from everyone.”

General correspondence

The storage boxes also held all his correspondences over a 50-year span—letters from Percy Cerutti, Aldo Scandura, John Sterner, Fred Wilt, and John Jewell, among others. He answered every letter and inquiry sent to him. Gary recalls hearing his dad peck away at the typewriter in the living room past midnight. “His correspondence was always detailed, organized and well thought out,” said Gary.

Here is a letter he sent to Dr. George Sheehan dated 1973.

Dear Doctor Sheehan,

I noted in Runner's World that you mentioned 40 percent of body heat is lost through the head. I have been looking up things on fat metabolism. It has been stated that the subcutaneous fat on the scalp, nose, eyelids, earlobes and distal extremities is very thin, whereas the layer of subcutaneous fat is thicker everywhere else. My question is, what is the process by which so much of the body heat is lost through the head? Logically, fat serves as insulation, among other things, and is in short supply on the head, but 40 percent is a lot. How does this work?

Yours, Ted Corbitt

Dr. Sheehan responded on the same notepaper that Ted sent:

Dear Ted,

I picked that figure up in a discussion of cold weather clothing. I cannot verify it but think it will stand up for a normally clothed man in cold weather.

Regards, George

Gary came across the duplicate of a letter his father had sent him during his first year at Howard University, dated September 4, 1969. Ted wrote: “If you work as hard as you should, there will be no extra time. If you find yourself with time to kill, you will know that you’re not doing everything right or well.”

“My father never wasted a minute of his day. He averaged five hours a night of sleep and went full force during the day. He had amazing energy,” said Gary.

A day with Bonnie Ross and the *Long Distance Log*

Ted was a close friend of Browning Ross, a teammate at the 1952 Helsinki Olympics, who founded the Road Runners Club of America. One of Gary’s plans moving forward is to meet with the children of the legendary runners of his father’s era to swap stories and hunt down more history. He started with Bonnie Ross, Browning’s daughter, who lives in New Jersey and spent an afternoon with Gary at the apartment. Browning died in 1998 at the age of 74 from a heart attack. When Bonnie arrived at the apartment, she was overwhelmed by the trophies and history that Ted had accumulated. No trophies were ever displayed in the Ross house, as her mother felt that was bragging. She gave them away or sold them. Browning had so many that after his wife sold some of them, the family had enough money to take a trip to Hawaii. In contrast to Ted’s unruly storage boxes, Bonnie had meticulous photo albums cataloging her father’s legacy. After reminiscing, Gary put Bonnie to work sorting through the correspondence boxes. She found a letter written to Ted from her dad, dated 1972. At the end of the letter Browning, who knew of Ted’s penchant for keeping things, stated: “Ted, discard this letter when through with it.”

In 1956, Ross recognized the need for distance-running results to be published and distributed in order to increase the public’s awareness of the sport. He created the *Long Distance Log*, which at the time was the only publication devoted exclusively to long-distance running in the U.S. The first issues were mimeographed on the backs of recycled high school history tests. The *Log* became the major instrument to unite runners over the next 20 years. Ross and his family typed, collated, and copied the *Log* on a mimeograph machine and mailed it to the subscribers. It was a painstaking job. Bonnie recalls the night her 3-year-old



▲ Browning Ross's daughter Bonnie spent an afternoon with Gary at the apartment. Between Bonnie's and Ted's collections, they have all the copies of the *Long Distance Log*.

sister crumpled the pages by mistake. Her mother had to iron them back into shape before copying them. Between Bonnie's and Ted's collections, they have all the copies of the *Long Distance Log*. Preserving the *Log* is at the top of the list of Jean Knaack, executive director of RRCA. The goal is to put the collection in an electronic format, which will require hundreds of hours and high cost to scan. Brent Ayer, the president of the RRCA, has donated \$500 to the task, and as word spreads throughout the running community, more donations are filtering in to the RRCA. "I think this is the most important contribution we can make to the history of our sport," said Tom Osler, a professor of mathematics at Rowen University in New Jersey and the author of *The Conditioning of Distance Runners*. Osler was a huge fan of Ross and Corbitt and says of Ross, "He was my hero, coach, and mentor for my entire life. No other man except my own father had so much influence on so many aspects of my life."

The Marathon Guide

In 1963, Ted started the *Marathon Guide* with Nat Cirulnick as a way to keep marathoners throughout the country connected. He compiled the results; typed,

copied, and collated them; and mailed them to subscribers. The cost was 35 cents. Among the correspondence we found was a letter from a runner requesting a copy of the *Guide*. Two quarters were glued to the handwritten note, which read, “Keep the change.” The quarters were still glued to the letter.

New York Road Runners publication

In 1958, Ted became the first president of the New York Road Runners. One of his goals as president was to create a publication with which its members could communicate race results and the minutes of the board meetings. To that end, Ted became the editor, writer, and publisher of the club’s newsletter and remained its editor for 20 years. In a box in a kitchen cupboard, Gary found every issue that Ted wrote. Throughout the years, Ted’s initial newsletter, which he typed on legal-size paper and mimeographed on the dining room table with help from Gary and his mother, has transformed into the current *New York Runner*, a glossy, well-regarded magazine that is distributed to its more than 40,000 members.

Odds and ends

Some of the more interesting—you could say quirky—things we found include:

- Sewing needles, yarn, and thread. Ted repaired his own socks, pants, and even underwear. He never threw anything out.
- His photo album from World War II when he was stationed on Okinawa. He had classic pinup-style pictures of Billie Holiday, Etta James, and Maria from the Duke Ellington Trio, as well as photographs of the villagers.
- Excerpts from his 1947 class notebook at New York University where Ted took a physical therapy course: “Wear jacket to class. No gum chewing. Be well groomed.”
- His collection of jazz albums and CDs.
- An abacus.
- A pamphlet from 2001 titled, *A Guide to Manhattan’s Toilets*.
- A 25-pound bag of buckshot he used for weight training.
- Millrose Games programs since 1948. He was a regular attendee.
- A virtual history of the New York Pioneer Club. The NYPC was founded by Joe Yancey in 1936. This integrated club featured road runners, track and field athletes, and race walkers of all ethnic backgrounds. The club predated Jackie Robinson’s integration of baseball by more than 10 years.

- Film footage of the 1952 Olympic start and finish, all of his five London-to-Brighton races, and clips of Ted setting American records at 50 miles, 100 miles, and a 24-hour run.

Next steps to preserve the history

Ted's alma mater, the University of Cincinnati, plans to place a life-size photograph of Ted in the hallway of its field house. Ted is not only a member of the university's Athletic Hall of Fame but also one of its most distinguished alumni. Bill Schnier, the track and cross-country coach, calls Corbitt the most remarkable man he has ever known.

The course-certification papers are in storage at New York Road Runners. According to Ken Young of the Association of Road Racing Statisticians (ARRS), the association is on a mission to document every marathon that has ever been held in the world. "You never really know what someone 10 or more years down the line will need. Much of this is not replaceable. Every effort needs to be made to archive Ted's files. We are trying to preserve the history of our sport before it is lost."

His medals are being distributed among ultrarunners. Laura Yasso, an ultrarunner and admirer of Ted, took on the task of sending his medals to ultrarunners such as Scott Jurek, who was inspired by Ted. Gary Wang, an ultrarunner and 11-time finisher at Western States (nine finishes under 24 hours)



▲ A sampling of some of Ted's medals in a display case that was always in the living room. Some of the medals have been sent to ultrarunners like Scott Jurek.


received one of Ted's medals and wrote to Gary: "I can't tell you how excited I feel to receive one of your dad's medals. It was a great sadness to hear of Ted's passing. He was a pioneer of our sport, a man with a great heart." Continuing in his parent's path of giving back to the community, Gary donated more than 200 books to a youth ministry in the neighborhood.

Closing the door for good

"We've lost the best chronicler of the sport. No one kept records and files like Ted," said John Kelley of his friend and fierce competitor. They corresponded about races, results, massage therapy, and the deaths of their wives. His statement is right on the mark. The current generation of runners and the ones coming up the ranks know very little of the history of the sport.

Ted's collection is vast enough to be taught as a college course. One of the many tasks on Gary's list is to create a Ted Corbitt archive that would include his biography, his records, and his papers, among other things. But that takes time and funding. Friends of Ted's are beginning to step forward to help Gary. Laura Yasso has offered to build a Facebook page dedicated to Ted.

Gary has received some advice on how to move forward but also feels he needs to pass on some advice to others in his situation. "Start throwing things out! I was left with an impossible situation that consumed my life for 18 months." Now that he has that off his chest, he also states that his father's inability to throw anything out left the running community with a treasure trove of history. He encourages others to interview elders and their close family and friends while they are still among the living and to take care of family business and, "label all pictures!"

Gary has also realized that when you lose a loved one, a huge void is created, and no matter how close you were or how many times a day, week, or month you spoke together, you can't pick up the phone or answer an e-mail any longer. "Despite over 20 years of interviewing my father, I now have even more questions," said Gary, who has adopted some of his father's Eastern philosophies and believes his father's spirit is guiding him through this process. "There's a universal order that connects people at the proper time and place. We can build from the legacy my father left behind not only to preserve the history of the sport but also to build on his love and respect for people in general and his uncommon selflessness." The torch has been passed to Gary from his father to do whatever he—and the entire running community—can do to honor the many pioneers of our sport in such a manner that their contributions are never forgotten. 

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