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MARATHON; Miles to Go and Promises to Keep

By ROBERT LIPSYTE

Ted Corbitt, the last surviving spiritual elder of the modern running clan, insists that he is "no guru" and that he wants no one to follow him on 24-hour running "stunts" or to build philosophies from advice as spare as he is: "Keep moving. Do something useful."

Corbitt is 75 years old. Tomorrow morning at 6, he will start moving around a 1.2-mile track at Juniper Valley Park in Queens. Because he developed shin splints last week, he will probably walk instead of trot, the pace he assumed after a diagnosis of bronchial asthma 20 years ago. His goal is to finish the Ted Corbitt 100-mile race -- sponsored by the Broadway Ultra Society to celebrate Corbitt's record of 13 hours 33 minutes 6 seconds, set in England in 1969 -- within 24 hours. There is a 30-hour time limit.

He has run, he thinks, something more than 200,000 miles, mostly alone, often fantasizing in the slow and dreamy way he speaks. "I might imagine the face of a pretty girl," he said softly, "and I'll debate with myself, should I focus on her eyes or her hair, and thinking about that can go on for miles and miles." He hides a dry chuckle behind his large, strong hand. Is he being mystical or merely drifty?

Lunch last Monday at a Bronx diner began with a standard, papery house salad on a chilled glass dish. Because Corbitt puts his fork down after every bite and chews every mouthful to liquid, it took him an hour to finish lettuce, tomatoes, cuke and pepper slices, and carrot shavings drenched in creamy Italian dressing. His weight rarely goes above 130 pounds. He is about 5 feet 7 inches tall.

He usually eats two meals a day or three small ones. Lunch is sometimes four bananas. Dinners are salads, brown rice, pasta, beans, roasted turkey and chicken, baked fish. Since his wife died, he does all his own cooking, usually on Saturdays and Sundays for the entire week.

Except for the inhalants Ventolin four times a day and Tilade as a prophylactic before exertion (he skips them if he's feeling particularly good) he takes no regular medicine. Because black men seem particularly vulnerable to sudden death from asthma, he said, he has changed his longterm goal from living to 100 years to making 2001, but he won't quit moving: "There's no point living to 100 if you don't know you are alive."

Each day he takes about 2,000 milligrams of vitamin C (much more if he feels a cold coming on) and twice a day 400 international units of vitamin E. Should he have to take antibiotics for dental surgery, he will add buttermilk and homemade yogurt to his diet to build up the compromised good bacteria.

He exercises several times a day, opening his chest, stretching his calves and hamstrings, applying resistance to arm, back and stomach muscles. He emphasizes self-massage, along the meridian traces of his arms and legs, of his head and scalp and the six acupuncture spots on each foot that affect various

other body parts.

During the second hour of our lunch, he ate his main course, a plate of broccoli and chicken on yellow rice.

He never smoked and had only one drink, a can of beer in the Army. He gave up pork, which he still misses, in the 60's while he was studying nutrition, and then beef. He was a vegetarian for nine years, but decided that chemical fertilizers and crop sprays were as damaging as the antibiotics in meat. He brought fish and chicken back to his diet. He peels and scrubs fruits and vegetables, often soaking them in 35 percent food-grade hydrogen peroxide. He drinks a lot of water.

Corbitt wakes up around 5:30 A.M, without an alarm clock ("If you need an alarm you don't really want to get up") and he trots or walks for hours in light clothing ("chilling is a danger only when you stop, so as long as you are moving, even if you are suffering, it's all right"). Last year, he walked the New York City Marathon in 6:22, which is about a 13-minute-per-mile pace. Forty-three years ago, he ran the Boston Marathon in 2:48:42, which is about six minutes per mile.

Corbitt's life's run began on a South Carolina farm, wound through the University of Cincinnati, the 1952 Helsinki Olympics (he finished 44th in the marathon), and the streets of the Bronx and Manhattan, where daily runs of 20 to 30 miles would bring him to work as a director of physical therapy. He is recently retired, although he works part-time. There were also thousands of miles of "stunts," his term for the 100-mile races and 24-hour runs, often known only to his wife and son, that satisfied his need for personal tests.

Corbitt was the inside man during the running boom, losing sleep laying out and measuring courses for the Pioneer Club, the Amateur Athletic Union, the New York City Marathon, while the more ambitious and extroverted gurus, Fred Lebow, Jim Fixx and Dr. George Sheehan, drew the crowds to run in them. Words of wisdom come more slowly out of Corbitt than forkfuls of food go in.

"Consistency is the key," he will say. "You can't store fitness."

His happiest moments, he said, were not running, but playing with children and watching other athletes. And, yes, sometimes he does wonder about all that time spent running. He might have gotten a doctorate in physiology or quantum physics, he said, or chased an early talent at water colors.