



Ted Corbitt

Marathon, Ultramarathon

Lifetime Honors Point Total:
4,750

Best Times

Marathon—2:26:44

January 5, 1958, Philadelphia
(Shanahan Marathon)

50-mile—5:34:01

October 25, 1970, Rocklin, California
(AAU Championship)

100-mile (track)—13:33:06

October 25–26, 1969, Walton-on-Thames, England (RRCA Invitational)

24 hours (track)—134.7 miles

November 3–4, 1973, Walton-on-Thames, England (RRCA Invitational)

Born: January 31, 1919, Dunbarton, South Carolina

Current Residence: Bronx, New York

Education: Woodmere High School, Cincinnati (1938); University of Cincinnati (1942)

Affiliations: New York Pioneer Club

Professions: Physical therapist, road running administrator

Career Highlights: 1952 Olympian who collected 30 victories in almost 200 marathons and ultramarathons; AAU 50-mile champion; set many ultra-distance records

He Invented Distance

With his whispering speech and matter-of-fact distance breakthroughs, Ted Corbitt was an unsung pacesetter on and off the course. While training upwards of 30 miles a day, competing in several marathons and ultras a year, and working full-time as a physical therapist, Corbitt founded the New York Road Runners Club, was named the first president of the Road Runners Clubs of America, and practically invented the system of course measurement for road races in use today.

When the New York City Marathon became a citywide event in 1976, sparking the worldwide marathon boom, officials argued over whose idea it was. But one thing was certain: It was Corbitt who had laid out and measured the five-borough route.

But the man preferred to remain deep in the shadows. "We called him the phantom of the opera," said Norb Sander, 1974 New York City Marathon winner. Ironically, the

phantom, barely audible in interviews, acquired an aura of priestly mystery. But every mile he ran—and by career's end he'd covered 250,000 of them—was based on a simple proposition. "I had an urge to run," Corbitt says now. "During the day, my body would remind me, 'Get out and run.'"

"When someone on our college campus spoke up about racism, he was expelled from school for being a communist."

Corbitt, named after President Theodore Roosevelt, first felt the urge in his youth in Cincinnati where he saw 1936 Olympic star Jesse Owens in a race against players from baseball's Negro Leagues. Corbitt ran for the

University of Cincinnati track team but faced racism at every turn. The squad could not compete at certain schools, like Kentucky, which barred blacks from campus. On bus trips, the athletes were denied access to hotels and restaurants. At one cross-country meet in Ohio, Corbitt ended up sleeping on a cot in a school gym.

After college, Corbitt was not allowed into Cincinnati area track meets, so he turned to road racing, which was less restrictive. Corbitt joined the aptly named New York Pioneer Club, run by a mortician named Joe Yancey.

In his first marathon, at Boston in 1951, Corbitt placed 15th. The next year, Corbitt's 3rd-place at Yonkers put him on the Olympic marathon squad for Helsinki, where, suffering from stomach distress, he placed 44th. In 1954, he won three of four marathons, including Yonkers, the national championship.

Soon, Corbitt found marathons too short. He entered 30-milers, 40-milers, 50-milers. At times, he did them on the track. Corbitt thrived on routines, precision, repetition. Circling a track

shoe search

In Corbitt's heyday, there were no running shoes, at least not with any support. First, he ran in tennis sneakers, then in Hush Puppies. At one time, Corbitt, who spent 2 years in the service, trained in army boots. He ran in a Riddell cross-country shoe. He tried custom-made shoes from Norway and Japan. He ran in Tigers, the forerunner to Asics, and finally Corbitt settled on New Balance, his overall favorite.

for 200 laps was his cup of tea. He traveled to England for the famed London-to-Brighton 52.5-miler on the roads, placing second twice in what was considered the world ultramarathon championship.

One of his proudest victories was the 1968 AAU national 50-miler on the roads. Corbitt was sidelined for 6 weeks leading up to the event after hurting his back while avoiding a dog. "I still won," he said, "but it was a tough recovery."

Tough? During that time, Corbitt increased his weekly mileage to 300, and a legend grew out of his occasional jaunts around the periphery of Manhattan Island—two loops at once—for 62 miles. Corbitt would not accept limits. He showed that the marathon was not the ultimate endurance test, and that people in midlife could excel in even the longest of races. Corbitt set all of his ultramarathon records past the age of 45.

In one, at 48, he ran a harrowing 100-mile race on the track in England in 13:33:06, to smash the American record by 3 hours. On the same track at 53, Corbitt competed in a 24-hour run, covering 134.7 miles to place third. Corbitt dulled the pain of these adventures with a trick he picked up from the Australian coach Percy Cerutti. With his hands closed and thumb pressed against the index finger, Corbitt squeezed hard. "This subdued the pain," he said.

Corbitt used this technique with his patients at the New York's International Center for the Disabled, where he worked for 44 years, retiring in 1993. Corbitt gradually diminished his running after collecting 199 marathons and ultras.

In recent years, he has walked the New York City Marathon, appropriately anonymous. But in 2000, at 81, Corbitt got the itch to run long again and entered his first 6-day race.

First-Timer

The 6-day race—a run, eat, and sleep endurance festival—is considered the ultimate ultramarathon. In the spring of 2000, Corbitt, 81, entered one in New York City, circling a 1-mile loop on Wards Island. His goal was 50 miles a day of walking and running. He found that "trotting" didn't work for him and ended up mostly walking a total of 240 miles, a record for his age. But then, no one his age had ever tried it before.