



Ted Corbitt at the 1952 Olympic Games in Helsinki, Finland

racing for life: a racer's quiet legacy

As world-famous sports figures go, Ted Corbitt might not be a household name. Aspiring teenage athletes don't hang his poster on their walls, or want to wear the shoes he endorses or drink the sport drink he drinks. But in the field of marathon and ultra long distance running, Ted Corbitt is Michael Jordan, Willie Mays and Lance Armstrong all rolled into one. As a pioneer in the field of marathon and particularly ultra marathon running, Corbitt is referred to as the "Father of Long Distance Running." Corbitt is an Olympian, one of the first inductees to the Distance Running Hall of Fame, and a competitor in 199 marathons. Having set and held innumerable records for distance running, he is part of the sport's living legacy.



ready to race

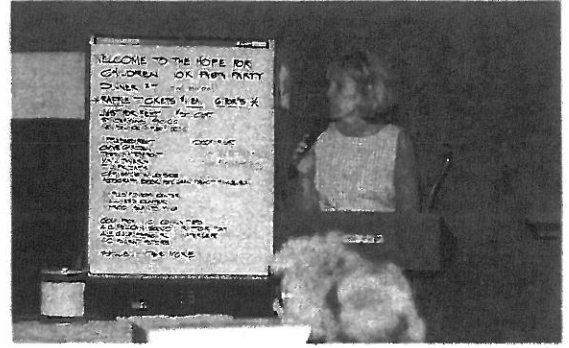
The 84-year-old Corbitt, a Manhattan resident, will visit Naples this month as the special guest of the Southwest Florida Strider's Hope for Children 10K/5K. Though he no longer runs, he still walks in an occasional race, and when he can't walk, he enjoys watching from the sidelines. Devotees of long distance running often recognize Corbitt at these races, and their reaction is that of seeing a hero in the flesh.

Fran Fidler, former president of the Southwest Florida Striders and the founder of Hope for Children, had a similar reaction the first time he met Corbitt at New York's Distance Running Hall of Fame, where a ceremony was held to honor a posthumous inductee, Steve Prefontaine. On a second meeting at the New York City Marathon last November, Fidler approached Corbitt again, this time to get his picture. "As I was walking up to him, it dawned on me how much I wanted to invite him down to Naples for our event," says Fidler. "I asked and he said 'yes.' Even though I've invited people before and they've said yes," adds Fidler with a laugh, "it's still amazing to me that they come!"

Amazing is an apt word when discussing Ted Corbitt. Though the soft spoken Corbitt is not inclined to boast of his accolades, when pressed, he will talk about his history and interest in the sport, and how he became known as the "Father of Long Distance Running."

"As a kid growing up in South Carolina, I ran. It just seemed natural, part of my development. I didn't even know there was such a thing as a footrace," says Corbitt, "until I saw some footage of the 1932 Olympics, of the runners in Berlin. Then I came to Cincinnati and ran my first race a few months later, a 50-yard dash that I won."

It would take nearly 20 years for Corbitt to run his first marathon, the 1951 Boston Marathon, though he'd wanted to participate in one for decades. "Back then, there weren't marathons every weekend like there are now. They were few and far between," he says. A year after running the Boston Marathon, Corbitt found himself on the 1952 US Olympic marathon team. Over the years, Corbitt's



Kim Sweat, an advocate for children with cancer, speaking at a dinner for Hope for Children

interest grew to ultra long distance running and ultra marathons, which are usually 30 miles or more. He has set records for 24-hour runs, 50-mile championship races, and grueling six day—that's right, six day—marathon foot races. His last race was in 2001, when he walked a total of 303 miles in one such six-day race.

"I was not a champion marathon-runner," says Corbitt, "but I was well known in the field. Other runners knew me, knew my strengths and weaknesses, I managed to win a few races, and I distinguished myself as an ultra marathoner."

Off the racecourse, Corbitt added to the notoriety and professionalism of the sport by pushing for accurate road racecourse measurements. He has also written extensively on ultra marathoning for sports magazines, encouraged others to try ultra marathoning, and generally worked to promote the field of long distance running. In between furthering the sport, Corbitt had a long career as a physical therapist in New York, where he worked with polio victims, amputees and those with sports-related injuries.

An African American, Corbitt is widely credited with breaking the color barrier in long distance running. He downplays his role, citing several black runners who came before him, but none were so well known, or had the staying power of Corbitt, when it came to distance running. Although he himself casts some doubt on the claim, Corbitt has gone down in the annals of history as the first black man to win a marathon race.

"There was a perception," he says, "that blacks could not run long distances. That was never true, there just weren't enough races around and many of them were not open to blacks." He rattles off the names of many blacks who also won early races, again down playing his own accolades in the field, but then adds quietly, "but I was the first black man to win the national marathon championship, and the first black man to have a high profile in the sport. At one point, I had finished more marathons than anyone else in history, but of course now there are guys who run a marathon a week."