

MARK WOODS

Distance runner set expert pace

Some athletes celebrate after making a single tackle or running a few yards.

Ted Corbitt ran more than 200,000 miles. And as best I can tell, he downplayed every step he took, even the ones that led to the Olympics and beyond.

You probably don't recognize the name or know anything about Ted Corbitt. But you should. Especially if you're participating in the Gate River Run.



Corbitt

When it comes to the distance part of distance running, few people in history can match Corbitt's feats. Some believe he ran more miles than any other human being. And as mind-boggling as his personal accomplishments are, his contributions to the sport are even more lasting.

When Corbitt died of cancer in December at age 88, many of the tributes written about him described him as "the father of long distance running." He also is the father of one son.

Gary Corbitt, 56, is the research director for WJXT TV-4. I've known Gary for a while. And while I knew Gary had a passion for running and history, it wasn't until a few years ago that I realized why.

He didn't brag about his father. Not because he wasn't proud of him. Because, I now realize, he has the same personality as his dad.

There isn't enough space here to tell you about even a fraction of Ted Corbitt's life and running times. But here are a few details:

■ He was born on Jan. 31, 1919, the same day as Jackie Robinson, which seems fitting. Corbitt undoubtedly faced many barriers in his life and his sport. But the fact he was chosen to be the first president of the New York Road Runners Club — in 1958 — tells you something about the respect he quietly earned.

■ He ran in the 1952 Olympic marathon. For most people, this would be the first clause in an obituary. Olympic marathoner. For Corbitt, this didn't even make the first few paragraphs. He ran 199 marathons and ultra-marathons, holding records in the 20-, 50- and 100-mile distances.

■ His training runs are the stuff of lore. He lived in the Bronx and ran 20 miles to work every day. Some days he ran home. And then took the stairs to their home. On the 15th floor.

■ He was known to log 300-mile weeks. And although he slowed down, he didn't stop until the end. At age 84, he walked 68.7 miles in 24 hours. And at age 88, Corbitt, who was revered as a physical therapist, still was seeing several patients a day. "Keep moving," he once said when asked for advice. "Do something useful."

His biggest contribution to running might be a mundane but immensely useful one. He established the system used to measure and certify races.

Gary remembers growing up, tagging along to events with his dad. The fields were small. Maybe a few dozen runners, all incredibly fast.

That changed in Ted Corbitt's lifetime, as big communal races sprung up around the country. And he helped create that change.

When he died, the obituaries said he was survived by a son in Jacksonville.

This is true. But he also is survived by today's road races and by the people running in them, including Gary. So on Saturday, take a minute to think of Ted Corbitt.

Then, if you really want to be humbled, think about one of his training runs.