

New York City Marathon can thank Ted Corbitt, the pied piper of running

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To have 45,000 people running through New York City's five boroughs on an early November Sunday, escorted by smiling police amid enormous cheering crowds, has come to be as normal as changing the clocks.

It will happen again Sunday with the 43rd running of the New York City Marathon. But there was a time when only a tiny portion of the population had what 1972 Olympic marathon champion Frank Shorter slyly called "the disease" of long-distance running."

And that was when Ted Corbitt was the benevolent pied piper of fitness.

"I started running back in the late 1960s," said New York Road Runners Club chairman George Hirsch. "There wasn't a whole lot of information. But back then, the one person everyone who ran looked to was Ted.

"Whatever he did, we did. If Ted was wearing long sleeves for a run, we wore long sleeves."

On Wednesday, Corbitt, who died at 88 in 2007, was inducted posthumously into the Road Runners Hall of Fame, setting old runners' mental clocks back well before the existence of the New York City Marathon.

"We knew he had made the 1952 Olympic team," said Elliott Denman, the 1956 Olympic racewalker from NYU, "so that kind of put him on the [runners'] map. A very quiet guy, kind of reclusive. When you run that much, I guess you tend to become that way. All those incredible workouts."

Corbitt ran from his Yonkers home to his physical therapy job in Lower Manhattan every day. He routinely did 31-mile counter-clockwise loops around Manhattan Island, once adding a second lap on consecutive days. "In the summertime," Hirsch marveled.

Before there was much awareness of such events, Corbitt held every American record in races from the marathon distance up to 100 miles. By the time Denman joined Corbitt's New York Pioneer Club in 1954, Corbitt was known for his cult running publication, mimeographed on his kitchen table and distributed at small races and by mail.

In those days, the handful of serious runners would meet on Sundays at Macombs Dam Park, outside the original Yankee Stadium, for races circling the stadium. Corbitt was part of that group, "but it seemed like he was never there," said past New York Marathon director Allan Steinfeld. "He was off running around [Manhattan] Island."

"He basically ran a marathon a day," Shorter said. "Ted was an example of how you realize you're out there because you simply love to run, you love to move across the ground."

Corbitt had been running, as his only real mode of transportation, from his childhood on a South Carolina cotton farm through high school and college in Cincinnati -- long before black athletes were on the distance-running scene.

Corbitt was co-founder of the Road Runners in 1958, and according to Port Washington's David Katz -- the international track technician who has been scoring and measuring both Olympic and local races for decades -- he invented the sport.

"Because he created the measurement program . Before, while the marathon existed as a race, it lacked accurate record-keeping."Huntington Station's Nina Kuscsik, the first official female winner of the Boston Marathon in 1972 and twice the New York champion, remembered the Road Runners Club at the time "was small and Ted was part of it; he was part of everything, and so far ahead of his professional, physical therapy.

"So when I had to pass him once in a marathon, ohhhhhh." She didn't remember which marathon, only the trauma of eclipsing an icon. "I had to pass him at 21 miles," she said. "I just felt terrible."