

Ted Corbitt: Hall of Fame Renaissance Man

October 07, 2013 at 1:45pm EST | by Barbara Huebner, Marathon News Service



When Dad ran road races, young Gary Corbitt would often help out by handing water to the runners, or perhaps by standing at an intersection to point them in the right direction. When other boys would have been devouring comic books, Gary was studying *Long Distance Log* and *Track & Field News*.

His father was Ted Corbitt, already a distance-running star and well down the road to becoming a legend. Not that Gary knew it at the time.

“It was just part of our lives,” said Gary Corbitt, now 62, in a recent telephone interview from his home in Jacksonville, FL. “I didn’t realize it was anything special.”

At a ceremony during Race Week of next month’s ING New York City Marathon, Ted Corbitt—an African-American distance-running pioneer and a founder and the first president of New York Road Runners, who died in 2007 at the age of 88—will be inducted into the NYRR Hall of Fame, along with a trio of champions who trod in his footsteps: Frank Shorter, Bill Rodgers, and Joan Benoit Samuelson.

“It was a unique perspective,” said Gary. “I grew up as the sport was growing up. I literally have a museum of history of the sport that I’m organizing and slowly disseminating.”

Perhaps the first major step in sharing that history is a website, www.tedcorbitt.com, which launched last week. Although loaded with statistical information on Corbitt’s long and award-laden running career, the site is also a gentle-but-firm reminder that Corbitt’s contributions off the roads, even outside of the sport, cover more ground than he did in even his longest ultramarathon.

A full-time physical therapist by profession at the International Center for the Disabled in New York City for 44 years, Corbitt was respected in the profession and revered by patients, whom he was still treating up to three months before his death. For more than 25 of those years, he also taught at Columbia University. Even at the height of his running career, he would frequently travel overseas for study, and in 1960 he co-authored a book, *Hydrotherapy*.

Even within the sport, many—including Gary and Corbitt himself—consider his greatest accomplishments to have been more on the administrative side than the athletic. After competing in more than a few road races that turned out to be of dubious distance, Corbitt in 1964 wrote a book on course measurement, and in 1965 he became the first chairman of the Amateur Athletic Union’s national standards committee. Among the innovations to which Corbitt contributed was the addition of 0.1% to every race distance, as a “short course prevention factor” to ensure accurate records.

“He helped invent the sport,” said David Katz, the technical consultant and road-course measurer for NYRR, to whom Corbitt was a mentor. “A physical act only becomes a sport when you apply parameters and rules and regulations. Ted was part of that small group of people who took the activity that we loved so much and had been doing for years and established the guidelines that turned it into the sport we know today.”

In addition, Corbitt was the first editor of *New York Runner*, the official publication of NYRR, and of the *Road Runners Club of America* newsletter now called *Club Running*.

As for the highlights of his more-famous running career, for which he was inducted into the Distance Running Hall of Fame as part of its inaugural class in 1998, Corbitt competed in the 1952 Olympic Marathon; won the National Marathon Championships in Yonkers in 1954; ran the Boston Marathon 22 times between 1951 and 1974; and at the age of 50 set a U.S. record for running 100 miles on the track (13:33:06).

Corbitt's results and longevity—he ran or walked 223 marathons and ultramarathons—came almost in spite of his training regimen, and often while hurt. Four times in the 1960s, he recorded training weeks of more than 300 miles.

“It was amazing how he could recover and be able to run through injuries,” said Gary, who cited discipline, goal-setting, consistency, and respect for education as things he learned from his father. “His threshold for pain and adversity was tremendous. He overtrained; he would tell you that today. But he had an ability to carry on despite the injuries.”

To Gary, his father's performance at a 2001 multi-day race conducted by the Sri Chinmoy Marathon team stands out. In that race, on a one-mile loop on Ward's Island, Corbitt walked 303 miles in six days, at the age of 82.

“I could make a good case that it may be his greatest athletic accomplishment,” said Gary. Still, Corbitt left at least one bit of unfinished racing business.

“He wanted to do 600 miles in six days,” said Gary.