

A Quiet Giant



One of my very best moments at my one and only New York City Marathon, in 1994, came at the starting line. There I lined up beside Ted Corbitt, who

stood almost unnoticed at the back where he could see all that he had helped create.

He said, almost apologetically and so quietly I could barely hear him in the race-time din, "I only walk the course now." His running had ended before this marathon went big time in 1976. And this is only one among many of Corbitt's progeny.

If Fred Lebow was the New York City Marathon's father, then Ted Corbitt was one of its grandfathers. New York's 25th-anniversary book, published in 1994, credited him with helping take the race citywide. Typically, Ted downplayed his role, claiming a misunderstanding.

Peter Gambaccini wrote, "Ted Corbitt had decided it was time to give this marathon a fresh boost. He envisioned a competition of some sort between runners who each would represent one of New York's five boroughs." Others took the idea and ran with it, devising a race *through* all the boroughs.

Ted was starting races in his area long before Fred Lebow started running, but pioneers seldom receive

much of the later glory. That was fine with the soft-voiced Corbitt. He never sought attention for himself.

He never acted as a standard-bearer for African American long-distance runners (of whom there are still few). He never directed a big race, never wrote a biography (though one came out *about* him), and never gave a major speech (that prospect would have paralyzed him).

Ted let his contributions speak for him. They reach far beyond his own running, which started early in the rural South, continued in track and cross-country at the University of Cincinnati, and bloomed late in the long distances.

He didn't run his first marathon until age 32. Then, just a year later, he ran that race for the United States at the Helsinki Olympic Games.

He found more success, if less glory, at even longer distances. In fact, the term "ultramarathon" may be his coinage.

Fifty years ago, Ted helped found the Road Runners Club of America, which would give the sport a framework when it exploded more than a decade later. He served as the first president of the New York Road Runners, which would grow into the world's largest club, and edited the publication that would become *New York Running News*. He set up this country's first course-certification

program and watched it become the world standard.

John Chodes asked me to introduce his book, *Corbitt* (published in 1974 by Tafnews Press). “Among us runners,” I wrote then, “Ted Corbitt is admired and envied not because he has run so well, but because he has run so well for so long. Corbitt is amazing to us because he has lasted.”

Ted was a relatively young 55 then but had run for about 40 of those years—surely logging more miles in that time than any other American. Little did we know that his running was ending the same year the book was issued. A severe case of asthma stopped him abruptly.

“Sometimes I think I developed the asthma so that I would stop [running],” he said later. “It had become an addiction, and I was burned out but afraid of quitting cold turkey. I had to taper off.”

He added that “fitness can’t be stored. It must be earned over and over, indefinitely.” So he became a walker.

On the occasion of Ted’s 75th birthday (in January 1994), Robert Lipsyte wrote in the *New York Times* that Ted is “the last surviving spiritual elder of the modern running clan. He never allowed himself to become a guru. He never had the showman’s flare of Fred Lebow or Dr. George Sheehan or Jim Fixx.

“He never made money from the boom or became celebrated outside the runner’s world. He just ran and ran and ran.”

Then he walked and walked and walked. Strolling through his New York

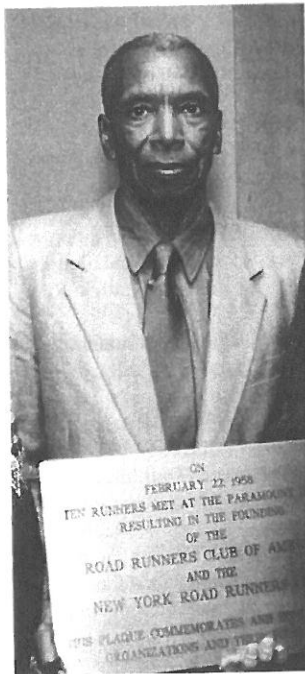
City neighborhood wasn’t enough, so he matched—and sometimes exceeded—his old running distances. The longest: 303 miles in a six-day race named for him, at age 82.

“Since I stopped running,” he told me then, “I sometimes walk around Manhattan Island, which is 31-plus miles by the route I take. I’ve probably run or walked this more than 100 times.

“In fact, I had planned to walk it the day of the terrorist attacks—and would have passed the site of the World Trade Center after its collapse.

“Of course I changed my plans. I decided to walk another 30-mile course, going up the Hudson River and back.”

Ted added that “most of my walks are 10-milers.” Running or walking, he remained a beacon for aging actively.



Ted Corbitt holds a plaque commemorating the founding of the RRCA 50 years ago.

Photo courtesy of RRCA

His way was as it had always been: "Keep moving. Do something useful."

By then Ted had revised downward his earlier goal of living 100 years. Already he had passed his backup target of celebrating the new century, reached at age 80. Now he could think: maybe 90?

Few lifetimes have been filled with more movement or more useful work. But even the best of lives must end eventually.

Friends of mine reported that his final finish line appeared near when they saw him last November. He was still attending events surrounding the New York City Marathon and men's

Olympic Trials, but in a wheelchair.

Soon afterward his son, Gary, sent me a note that Ted had advanced colon and prostate cancers and had been flown to a Houston hospital for treatment. He died there on December 12, about a month shy of his 89th birthday.

Published tributes listed Gary as his only child. That's technically true. But within the extended family of running, Ted Corbitt left thousands of children and grandchildren. I'm proud to be one of the many.

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You can contact Joe and read other columns by him at www.joehenderson.com.

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