

TED CORBITT

A distance pioneer

By Frank Litsky



Ted Corbitt may be the most significant figure in the history of running in the metropolitan area. But how do you describe him?

* As an Olympic runner who broke all sorts of American records in running?

* As the patron saint of ultra-distance running?

* As a founder of the Road Runners Club of America and the New York Road Runners and the president of each?

* As a seemingly forever official, consultant and wise old head for national governing bodies?

* As a major force in the measuring of road-race courses to the inch?

* As an inspiration for runners and non-runners of all ages who watched an old man nonchalantly test his body the way younger bucks would not dare?

* As a sweet, unassuming man who never realized how much he meant to so many people, an American idol before the days of the American Idol?

The answer? He was all of the above.

Sadly, hardly anyone outside the running community knew that. As his Wikipedia biography says:

“As an official, Corbitt was often the

Frank Litsky covered track and field for The New York Times for 50 years, until his retirement in 2008. Litsky graduated from Crosby High School in Waterbury, Conn., in 1943 and from the University of Connecticut three years later. He has been president of the New York Track Writers Association since 1969.

anonymous inside man who remained out of the limelight and left promotion and public relations to others. Corbitt never coached, wrote a book or became a fitness guru. In a career that spanned decades, he earned almost no money from running.”

But he was special. Fred Lebow, a running icon himself, called him “the father of American distance running.” Robert Lipsyte, in The New York Times, called him a “spiritual elder of the modern running clan.”

In reader comments after his obituary in The Times – Corbitt died in 2007 at age 88 -- Francis A. Schiro called him “a national treasure . . . an example of excellence on and, more importantly, off the track/road, a man with true dignity and real class.” Horace Grant called him “an inspiration to any of us who have dreamed to become distance runners, a true model for dedication to the sport.”

The only thing small about Corbitt was his frame -- 5-7, 130 pounds. Bad habits? None. He said he never smoked, and his only experience with

alcohol was one can of beer during his Army days in World War II.

His Times obituary said he “began running as a child on his father’s cotton farm in South Carolina and virtually never stopped.” At 55, bronchial asthma ended his elite running career and kept him from running to and from work every day. Instead, he kept running ultra-marathons. At 81, he walked 240 miles in a six-day race (with time out for sleep). At 82, in the same race, he did 303 miles.

In all, by his count, he ran 199 marathons and ultra-marathons (the ultras typically covered 50 to 100 miles, or 24 hours). He won 30 of those races. He never dropped out of one until age 75.

He ran the marathon in the 1952 Olympics in Helsinki. He held American records at 25, 40 and 50 kilometers, 100 miles and the marathon. His marathon best was 2:26:44.

All this was made possible by over-the-top training. Until his final years, he would sometimes do a workout of 13 miles on the track followed by 17

Looking Back at Track & Field in New York City

The theme of the 2010 Armory Yearbook is track and field history in New York City. The book’s 10 articles, written by some of our sport’s leading historians, provide a snapshot of that history.

The New York Athletic Club held its first “outdoor Games” at the Empire City Skating Rink, at 3rd Avenue and 63rd Street, in November 1868. Harry S. Magrane of the A.C. took the 440 and 880. In 1876 those Fall Games became the country’s first national championships; they were held at the club’s Mott Haven Track, a 1/5th-mile track located at 149th Street and Mott Avenue in the Bronx, not far from where Yankee Stadium sits today. Mott Avenue later became the Grand Concourse.

Students at Columbia College first competed in an athletic contest in May 1869 at the Capitoline Grounds in Brooklyn. By 1873 organized inter-

collegiate competition was being held, and in 1876 the IC4A held its first outdoor track championships.

The first city high school track championships were held May 17, 1879, at the Berkeley Oval in Manhattan. The meet was limited to private schools. Indoor interscholastic competition began in the 1890s. In December 1903, the PSAL held its first championships.

In the 1880s a new outdoor track was built by the Manhattan Athletic Club at 110th Street and Sixth Avenue. Over the years the outdoor nationals were held there as well as at Travers Island, on Long Island Sound; at Columbia Field, and at Randall’s Island, which opened in 1936, in time for that year’s Olympic Trials.

Indoor meets have been held in New York armories for at least 125 years. At one time, a dozen armories in the boroughs hosted track meets.

miles on the road. For a time, he ran 200 miles a week. He lived in Upper Manhattan and worked far Downtown and ran to and from work every day, sometimes running in the wrong direction, to Yonkers, to stretch the workout. Once, he ran the marathon distance every day for a month. He would run a 31-mile loop around Manhattan in 3:45. When he felt good, he did two loops.

His early life was not easy. He was an African-American, and at the University of Cincinnati, where he ran the 880, mile and 2-mile, racial discrimination surrounded him. As he told the website UltraWinning Online in 1988:

“The color line was drawn even in some of the meets in Cincinnati, so I could not participate in them. In the Midwest, places like Illinois and Indiana, there were track meets, but I was a little reluctant to take part in them because I did not know what type of reception I would get and what problems I would have getting a place to stay and getting something to eat.”

He earned a bachelor’s degree in education at Cincinnati and -- attending night school -- a master’s in physi-



Photo courtesy Gary Corbitt

Ted Corbitt runs the Olympic marathon in Helsinki in 1952

cal therapy at New York University. He worked in New York for more than 40 years as a physical therapist and taught physical therapy at Columbia and NYU. At 74 he retired from his main job but remained a full-time therapist into his 80s.

He forever carried the torch for distance running. In the 1998 book “First Marathons: Personal Encounters With

the 26.2-Mile Monster,” he said:

“The marathon demands patience and a willingness to stay with it. You must be willing to suffer and keep on suffering. Running is something you just do. You don’t need a goal. You don’t need a race. You don’t need the hype of a so-called fitness craze. All you need is a cheap pair of shoes and some time. The rest will follow.”

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