

Black Distance Runners: Minority within a Minority

by Ron Somers

In recent years, black distance runners like Kip Keino, Ben Jipcho, and Filbert Bayi have broken many world records and won a pile of Olympic and Commonwealth Games medals on the track. Other black runners such as Reggie McAfee, Tommie Fulton, Denis Fikes and Byron Dyce have excelled on the American track scene.

But what about black road runners—the marathoners and ultra-marathoners? Not as well known, but no less significant, are three American blacks who have achieved as much in road running as the Bayis and Jipchos have achieved on the track.

Jared Beads, a 46-year-old Baltimore maintenance man, holds the American record for non-stop running at 121¼ miles. Beads set the record in 1969, and at the time it was also a world record. In 1974, an Australian named Tony Rafferty ran 140 miles non-stop, but Beads vows to get his record back.

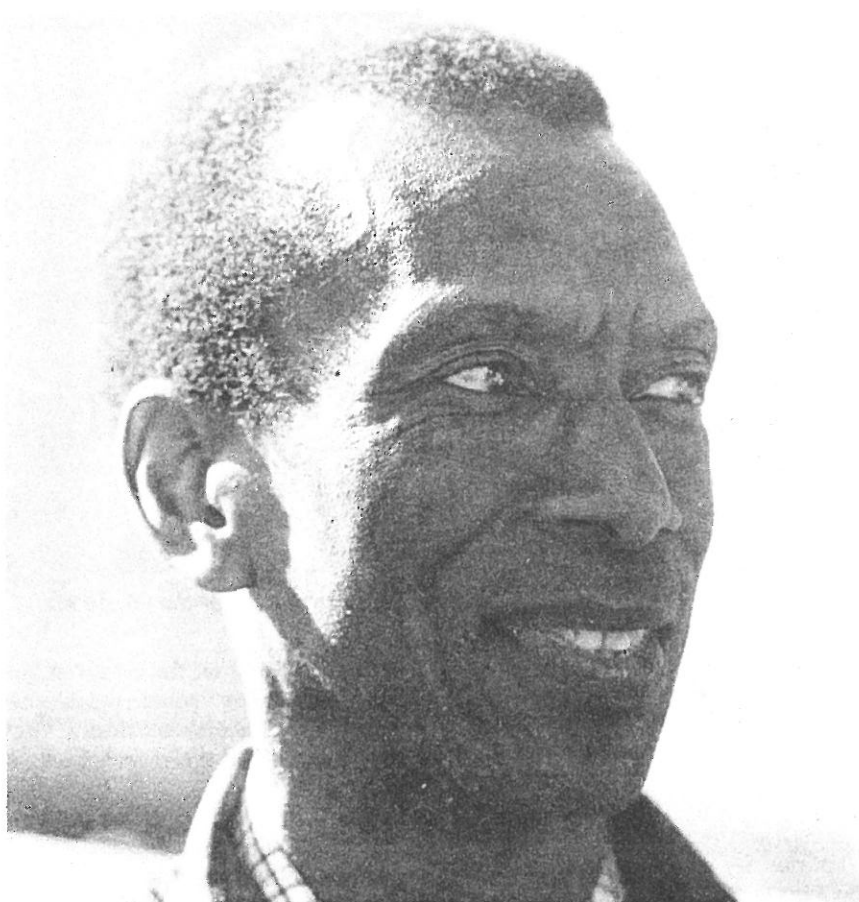
Ted Corbitt, a 55-year-old New York physical therapist, is the “father of American ultra-marathoning,” and is world record holder for career marathons. He’s run more than 180 of them, and has yet to record a DNF.

Marilyn Bevans, a 24-year-old Baltimore physical education teacher, is one of the top women marathoners in the US by virtue of her fifth-place finish at Boston this year and her fifth in the AAU championship.

Let’s take a closer look at each of these black road running stars:

JARED BEADS

In November 1974, Beads attempted to break Rafferty’s non-stop world record, not by one mile, not by two miles, but by 60 miles! He had tried to run from New York City to Baltimore’s City Hall—a distance of 200 miles. The



America’s most enduring runner, Ted Corbitt. (S. Sutton/Duomo)

run ended in disappointment when Beads limped into a Philadelphia gas station along busy US Route 1, his left knee so swollen he couldn’t run another step.

He leaned on the car that had accompanied him the 103 miles from the George Washington Bridge in New York and told a reporter: “I’ll be back. I’m not a quitter. There’s no way I’m going to let the devil win over me.”

Though deeply disappointed in his

failure at completing the New York to Baltimore run, Beads is brimming with confidence that he’ll succeed in his next attempt. “The world record? You better believe I’m gonna get it, no doubt about it,” he says enthusiastically.

“What happened last time was I pulled a muscle in the fold of my knee at about 60 miles,” he recounts. “I thought it was arthritis, but my doctor said it was a pull.” Swollen knee and all, Beads plugged on for another 45 miles

before he realized he wasn't going to make it to Baltimore, and wisely quit.

"I'm gonna run it on a track this time," says the likeable 5'10", 140-pound running fanatic of his next record attempt. That would mean 800 laps of a standard 440 track. "It does get boring going around a track," he admits, recalling his 481 lap run in 1969, "but you get your mind on something, and you keep thinking about it, and you pass the time that way. I think about my wife, my children, relatives, friends, and even my job. Everything comes across your mind when you run, good and bad. The bad thoughts slow you down, but if you live a clean life you can do anything."

Beads first gained attention in the Baltimore area about 10 years ago when he ran non-stop from Baltimore to Washington, D.C., and back—a 64-mile run that took him nine hours. Later, he ran from City Hall in Baltimore to the White House and back—80 miles in 12 hours.

"I thought that was a world record, so I called up the *Baltimore Sun* and asked them if it was," he recalls. "They checked the *Guinness Book of Records* and found out the record was 100 miles, 175 yards run by an Englishman at Madison Square Garden in 1882." From then on, Beads was determined to get the record, and keep it.

Despite his incredible physical stamina and mental tenacity, Beads seldom races. "Most of the races in Baltimore just aren't long enough for me," he says, despite a Baltimore Road Runners Club schedule liberally sprinkled with 15-, 18-, and 20-milers. "I'm a long distance runner," he says, drawing out the word "long" for emphasis. "I like to run 50-mile races, stuff like that, and they just don't have them around here."

Beads does race nearly every year in the Boston Marathon, though. He says, "The older I get, the better I get." In 1974, he ran his fastest marathon, a 2:42 clocking at Boston.

He started running in his early 20s when he was a boxer doing road work. Typically, his mother worried about him getting hurt in the ring. "She made me quit, but I wanted to stay in shape, so I stuck with running."

In the early 1960s, Beads began running with Walter Korpman and Dr. Gabe Mirkin, two of the founders of the distance running movement in the Baltimore area. Beads remembers the one- and two-mile races that Korpman and Mirkin organized: "I'd run 'em and get nothing out of it. I never got tired, so I decided I was a long distance run-

ner." (He emphasizes the "long" again.)

His present training consists of "15, 20, 25 miles a day—on the days that I work that is." On weekends, Beads will run up to 50 miles a day. Frequently, he'll become restless watching TV in the evening with his wife and six children. He'll put on his running clothes and go out for an all-night run just to relax.

Surprisingly, Beads develops few injuries. Probably the fact that he runs at such a slow pace keeps him injury-free. When he does get an ache or a pain he runs it out. "I always overcome injuries by running them out," he claims.

Beads adheres to no special training diet. "I just eat regular food," he says. "I enjoy eating raw ground beef. I ate that and raw eggs on the New York to Baltimore run."



Lo-o-ong runner Jared Beads

ner." (He emphasizes the "long" again.)

What if he does set the record at 200 miles? "Somebody could break that record too," he states realistically. "But if they do, I'll get the record back. It could go on and on."

Asked if he will ever retire from running, Beads replies emphatically, "No." When I'm 100 years old, I'm still gonna be running. The only way I'll retire is when they put me six feet under—I'm serious."

TED CORBITT

Corbitt is "possibly interested" in breaking Beads' non-stop record, but even if Ted never runs another step, he'll go down in the record books as one of the all-time great road runners. Corbitt has done it all, from 26 miles on up. Back in 1952, he was an Olympian in the marathon. In only his seventh 26-miler, he placed 44th in 2:51 at the Helsinki Olympics—a decent showing for an American in the dark ages before road

running was fully developed in the US.

Four years later, he missed the US team but was an alternate. By then, however, Corbitt was finding that standard marathons no longer challenged him. So he gave birth to the ultra-marathon movement in the United States. With the help of the Road Runners Club of America, he organized a 30-mile race in the Bronx in 1958. Corbitt of course won the event in 3:04:14.

Then he tried to organize a 50-mile track run in New York, but the AAU refused to sanction the race. They couldn't believe that anyone would want to run 50 miles.

Corbitt's thirst for ultra-marathons was so strong that he began a series of yearly treks to England to run the London to Brighton 52½-miler. In his first one in 1962 he finished fourth. In 1963 Corbitt won the 44-mile RRCA championship. Then it was back to England in '64 for another go at London to Brighton. This time he finished second.

In the early stages of the 1965 London-Brighton, he developed a pain in his foot. "When you've trained so hard and come so far for a race, you want to make a good showing no matter what," he says, so he stayed in the race and finished a gutsy second, only a minute behind the winner.

He returned for the '66 London-Brighton race and placed fifth. Then he stayed in England a few extra weeks to run a 50-mile track race. He placed third. But more importantly, at age 46 he broke the American record with a 5:54 clocking.

Despite his age, Corbitt's best running was ahead of him. He ran from London to Brighton in 1969 in 5:38:11, breaking the American record for 50 miles again, even with the 2½-mile handicap. He had averaged 2:49 for each 26¼-mile segment of the race, a remarkable feat considering that 17 years earlier his marathon time at the Helsinki Olympics was 2:51. Again, he stayed in England for a few more weeks, this time to run a 100-miler, which he ran in 13:33.

Corbitt's greatest accomplishment is probably his American record for the 24-hour run—134 miles, 1200 yards run in England in 1973.

"I wasn't really pleased though," says Ted. "I finished so far from my target of 155 miles." For the first hour of the race, he was right on schedule—7¼ miles. Then something happened during the second hour. "I was overcome by this euphoria, and ran nine miles the second hour, way too much," he recalls. "The euphoria wore off, and I settled

down to a reasonable pace, but my thighs started bothering me."

Though he had scheduled several walks as rest periods (a fact that distinguishes this run from Beads' run), his tight thighs forced him to walk more than he wanted. "I was not functioning well. After that third hour, it became a downhill thing for me."

Nevertheless, Corbitt hit 50 miles in 6:48 and 100 miles in 15:22. He remembers the last nine hours as "a real struggle, as I covered only 34 more miles." Corbitt finished third in the event which was won by Ron Bentley in a world record of 161 miles.

Corbitt began running as a child. "Mother Nature programmed you to run and walk. I grew up on a farm and ran and walked everywhere I went," he says.

As a college runner at the University of Cincinnati, Corbitt was a versatile performer running everything from the 220 to two miles. He didn't become interested in road running until the mid-'30s when he saw a picture of the Boston marathon winner, Tarzan Brown. "He intrigued me because he wasn't white. At the time, I thought he was a Negro, but later I found out he was an Indian," Corbitt recalls. It wasn't until 1951, however, that Ted ran his first marathon.

Though Corbitt has never run a sub-2:20, he can't be beaten for durability or consistency. "I'm especially proud of my record of running sub-2:50 for 22 years in a row, from 1951 to 1972," he boasts. His career total of 180-plus marathons (the total is still growing) is a record that has as much likelihood of being broken as Lou Gehrig's record of appearing in every New York Yankee ball game for some 14 years.

Corbitt's contributions to long distance running are not limited to his achievements on the road or track, though. He has written many articles on the sport, devised a weight training program for runners and served on the AAU course certification and timing committees.

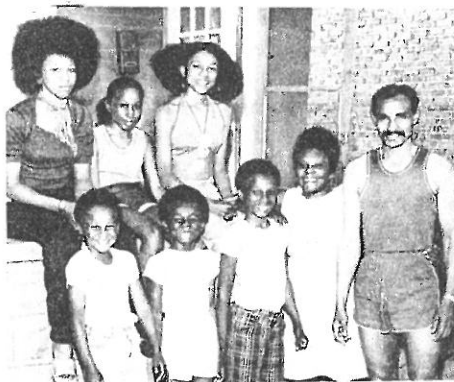
At 55, Corbitt has no plans to retire or slow down. He says, "I still hope to reach 200 career marathons, run the Pike's Peak Marathon and walk 100 miles in less than 24 hours."

Like every other runner who spends hours pounding the pavement, Corbitt has had his share of injuries. "It's harder to shake those nagging injuries as you get older," he admits. "Injuries damage the spirit more than the body, but I'm motivated to overcome injuries because I still have competitive goals."

MARILYN BEVANS

Like Beads and Corbitt, who see no end to their running, Marilyn Bevans says: "I never want to stop running. I can hear it now," she once told a newspaper reporter, "the announcer says, 'And now running in her 56th Boston Marathon, Marilyn Bevans.'"

Bevans has an incredible enthusiasm for running. "It's not my whole life, but it's a big part of it," she says. "I go to clinics and I read all I can about running. I love it." As a physical education teacher in the Baltimore school system, Bevans promotes running and fitness all day long. She has started a girls cross-country team, and she hopes to set a good example for her girls and instill in them the love she has for running.



Beads often leaves his wife and children . . . for all-night runs!

"I'd love to have one of my girls make it big," she says. "My dream is to see all my girls pass me in the Boston Marathon. When I'm old, they'll all go flying by me waving and saying hello to 'Granny' Bevans."

Her main goal in running is to consistently break three hours in the marathon. She broke three for the first time last April in Boston, improving her best by nine minutes. "I believe in being realistic," Bevans says. "I'd like to be one of the best women marathoners, but maybe it's not for me. I'd just like to be known as a halfway decent woman marathoner."

Bevans is already well known for her habit of carrying a transistor radio with her whenever she runs. "The only time I don't carry it is when I do intervals," she chuckles. "I'm a nut about music," she confesses. "I carry my radio through rain, sleet and snow. It really helps me in my marathons. After about six miles, I get bored and the radio keeps me entertained."

Marilyn began running in high school. She wanted to run on the track

team, but there was no girls team and girls weren't allowed on the boys team. That didn't stop her from running on her own, though. She continued to run throughout her four years at Morgan State University in Baltimore, but didn't run her first race until grad school in Springfield, Mass.

By the time she returned to Baltimore, she was running eight miles a day. "I ran a half-marathon, and figured if I could do that I could run anything," she recalls.

Like most American women runners, Bevans is not pleased with the job the AAU is doing with women's running. She would like to see longer track and cross-country races for women. "I'm not too good on the track," she says. "I love cross-country but the races are only 2½ and three miles. All the fast track women win those. I only finished 44th in the cross-country nationals last year, but I'd like to do better. Longer races would help."

As a coach, Bevans finds that there are still many social pressures against women and girls who want to become runners. "I see on TV where they say 'you've come a long way baby' and all that, but we still have a long way to go. "I have to convince my girls and their parents that you can still be feminine and run. I know how it is. I went through stages like that, too. At first, I would get into my car and go over to the park to run. Now, I don't care if my neighbors see me running. I just start out running at my house and I run through the neighborhood. I like shocking them," she says of the unenlightened people she still encounters.

According to Bevans, many males still can't believe that a woman can run a marathon. She remembers one boy student at her school who said: "Man, if Miss Bevans can run 26 miles, I could probably run a hundred miles."

Marilyn is convinced that women can do a lot more than they think they can, and not a day passes that she doesn't try to spread this philosophy to her students and her running proteges. Bevans wastes no time being militant. She simply runs harder, recruits more girls, and helps them discover the joys and satisfactions of running.

"There aren't many black women distance runners," she points out. So not only is she showing her students that distance running is for women but it's for blacks, too.

With runners like Beads, Corbitt and Bevans on the scene, the old stereotype of blacks as strictly sprinters is definitely dying. ●