

# Do or Die on the Road to Brighton

## A classic tale from Hal Higdon

*In 1966 Hal Higdon attended the London-to-Brighton road race, one of the most grueling long-distance races in the world. He was assigned to write a story of the race for Sports Illustrated, but because of space problems the rather timely story was never carried. Higdon consequently submitted the story to Bob Anderson, who published it under the title "Do Or Die on the Road to Brighton" in the second issue of Distance Racing News. Higdon's running stories have been an integral part of Anderson's publications ever since. In a classic reprint of that story, Marathoner shares the very untimely tale of a long and winding road.*

A breadman parked by the highway between London and the seacoast village of Brighton looked up in astonishment one Saturday last September to see, one by one, a string of runners go padding by. "They come all the way from London?" he inquired of a group of officials who had been bobbing along in the runners' wakes like seagulls trailing an ocean liner.

"How long did it take them?" inquired the breadman in the same incredulous tone he might have asked a goldfish swallower how he liked seafood.

The official estimated that the lead runners eventually cover the more than 52 miles to Brighton in just under six hours.

"Is that good time?" asked the breadman, and when assured it was, he said as if in explanation for his curiosity: "I wouldn't know, you see. I've never done it myself."

No breadmen were listed among the entrants in the 1965 London to Brighton race, the undisputed world's championships of long-long distance runs, but a 33-year-old laboratory clerk named Bernard Gomersall was, and he finished the double marathon (yes—double marathon) in 5:40:11. Gomersall's time failed by a quarter hour to better the record set several years ago (5:25:56 in 1960) by South Africa's Jackie Meklar, but stiff headwinds slowed him.

A record 57 runners started this year's Brighton, as the race is called, not a particularly large field by English standards, but then the sponsors are fussy and won't let just anyone in. You have to meet a qualifying standard.

Second, some 4½ minutes behind Gomersall (5:44:35), came Ted Corbitt of the New York Pioneer Club, one of a six-man American contingent described by race secretary H.L. Tharby not as a contingent, but a "bloody Yankee invasion." Corbitt, who had placed fourth in the race in '62 and second in '64, had his expenses paid by the American Road Runners Club, which raised \$160 by passing the hat among its own members at races like the Boston Marathon. That wasn't enough, of course, until AAU long-distance running chairman Aldo Scandurra re-read his AAU handbook carefully and discovered the supposed existence of a long-distance running fund.

"But there's been no money in the fund for years," the

AAU office told Scandurra.

"That's because nobody knew about it and asked before," Scandurra countered. "But I know and I'm asking." He got \$200.

That took care of Corbitt, and a possible individual title, but Scandurra wanted to try for the three-man team title too. Under Brighton race rules, all-star teams from a single country can't score. All scorers must come from a single club. So Scandurra cajoled enough money out of his own Millrose A.A. and got enough of its members out on the roads running 30-mile-plus workouts on Sunday afternoons to qualify a three-man team. Then for insurance he paid his and another runner's passage to London.

On arrival, Scandurra was impressed with the English approach to physical fitness. "I'm a fast walker," he said the night before the race, "but here, 60-year-old women go walking past me on the streets." He had hoped Millrose A.A. could finish first or at least duplicate their last year's second place finish, but two of their five men (including himself) failed to reach Brighton on foot. Millrose finished fourth and last looking as though it could benefit from the recruitment of several 60-year-old women.

Of course, most people who find it difficult to comprehend the idea of anyone desiring to run even one 26-mile marathon, wonder why an athlete would consider running the equivalent of two without stopping. The London to Brighton race is the English Channel of long-distance running, a Mad Dogs and Englishman sort of event. Although the Japanese proposed a 50-mile race for the 1964 Olympics, no one really took them too seriously. Despite the nearness of the continent, hardly anybody ever shows up for the Brighton except the English and their former colonials: the South Africans, on occasion a Rhodesian, and most recently the Americans. There was one Hollander in this year's race, but he finished next to last in 8:25:16 and shouldn't really be counted.

Brighton, the city, is a *Goyim*, United Kingdom-type Atlantic City. Highway A-23 that skitters through countryside and town from London to Brighton is quite regularly used for unusual events, including 12-man relay races, walking races, races with skis, roller skates,

fruitcarts, housewives pushing baby buggies (one such race reportedly attracted some 40 entrants), and an annual vintage car race immortalized several years ago in the film *Genevieve*. The first person of record to run from London to Brighton was F.D. Randall, who took 6:58 to cover the distance in 1899. "The Brighton course is a classic one," says Peter Goodsell, who as Gomersall's handler cycled behind him the entire distance. "It was used for races back in Georgian days. But why anyone would want to run this far on another course, I don't know."

Besides being, with the exception of one South African race, the longest major event of its kind, the Brighton can boast at least one other distinction, that of utilizing the largest starting device in the world: Big Ben. The race begins at the foot of the Westminster bridge on the fourth Saturday of September at Big Ben's first shuddering stroke of seven. This year the early lead was shared by Eddie Elderfield of the Thomas Valley Harriers and Millrose's pugnacious John Garlepp, who before taking up long-distance running five years ago was runner-up for the New York Golden Gloves middleweight championship and seldom gets sand kicked in his face at any beach, much less Brighton's, which is mostly rocks. While Elderfield and Garlepp jockeyed for the lead, twice-defending champion Gomersall, wearing a desperate expression, a red-shirt with "Leeds" (for Leeds Harehills Harriers) stitched on its front, and carrying a handkerchief knotted around one fist as though it were bleeding, lagged almost four minutes to the rear. With him lagged Corbitt.

"Is he in trouble?" bystanders asked Peter Goodsell, Gomersall's handler. Goodsell most of the race pedaled a bicycle a half-stride behind his man as though being dragged on water skis. Goodsell's job was to provide him with water, a sponge and words of encouragement.

"I'm taking bets on my man," Goodsell opined, but he had no takers. Unfortunately so, for by the mid-way point Garlepp and Elderfield had wilted like the crease of trousers in a London rain.

John Tarrant of the Hereford L.I.T.A. (Light Infantry Territorial Army) then moved to the front. Tarrant led to around 35 miles or where most super marathoners will tell you the race begins. Gomersall closed on him. One of the officials following the race described the action: "As soon as Gomersall caught Tarrant they had a bit of a ding dong for a while. Then Gomersall got a 50-yard lead and Tarrant walked off the course."

When Corbitt came by a bit later, his head wagging from side to side and looking any moment as though he might burst into tears, Tarrant lay stretched out on the grass. "He said something as I went by," remembered Corbitt later. "Right now I can't remember what." Gomersall extended his lead over Corbitt to five minutes in the next five miles and held it to crumple, as much from joy as fatigue, into the arms of his father, Sydney and his wife, Ruth, at the finish line. "Brighton Welcomes You," said the sign in red letters on the steel pier that nearby jutted out into the channel.

Afterwards they asked Corbitt, who is 45 years old compared to Gomersall's 33, if he would go back in 1966.

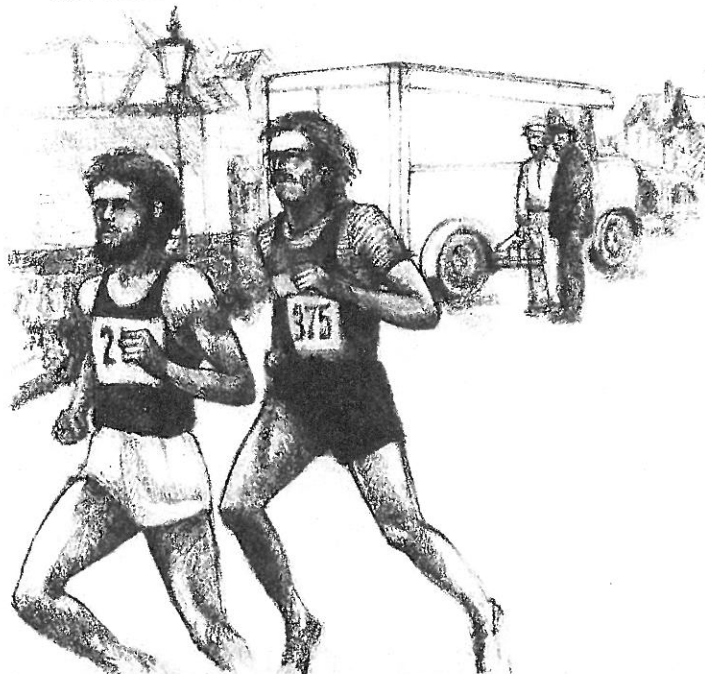
He smiled and shrugged: "It gets harder and harder."

Gomersall's handler Peter Goodsell meanwhile provided a blow-by-blow description for reporters: "Last year Corbitt came back a lot at the end and frightened us to death. This year he cracked early. Bernard just ran his own pace and didn't bother about anyone else. He lets them die in front of him. I knew Tarrant wouldn't stick it. I knew Elderfield wouldn't. I went up to him while he was leading us by about three minutes and he looked grey." Elderfield looked considerably greyer finishing in

sixth place. Garlepp, the other early leader, finished 10th, losing three positions while walking in the last mile. Of the other Americans, Nat Cirulnick and Vinnie Kern finished too far back to help their team. Aldo Scandurra, bothered by sciatica, dropped out at 20 miles. John Kelly, an Irishman by way of Australia where he was light heavyweight boxing champion (and no relation to two other better-known John Kelleys), quit at 45 miles troubled by varicose veins. "It's a devil when you have to stop after that far," he said.

In running a race like Brighton, the athletes reach a plateau of pain perhaps unapproached in any other athletic competition. Running a 440-yard dash is more immediately painful, but it is over in three-quarters of a minute. A super-marathon, on the other hand, drags on for the better part of a day. It is the difference between burning your finger with a match or being slowly roasted over a hot skillet.

Apart from the Brighton, the only other important international super marathon is the Comrades' Marathon, which covers 54 miles between Pietermaritzburg and Durban, South Africa. Bernard Gomersall won the Comrades



in May in record time, but the State Department frowns on American participation in South Africa because of the apartheid problem. Anyway, the only world-class American super-marathoner, Ted Corbitt, is Negro.

"It was very painful today," Gomersall admitted while soaking in a steaming tub in the Brighton baths shortly after his victory. He is an intense-looking individual with deep eyes and short hair. He spoke rapidly out of enthusiasm over his win. "It was mostly the mental strain. Nobody had ever won the race three times. In the first few miles all the people were going away from me and I worried, am I slipping up? I worried from start to finish. It was the least enjoyable of all the Brightons." He has run six. In preparing for this one he averaged 100 miles a week in training, often as much as 55 miles in two long runs over the weekend. Twice a week he would run the four miles from home to where he works as a laboratory clerk. Later on those evenings he would do interval runnings (quarters, halves, and miles) on a track with his wife, Ruth, holding the stopwatch. The couple have a five-year-old daughter named Bernadette.

Why would anyone want to make a hobby of running 52

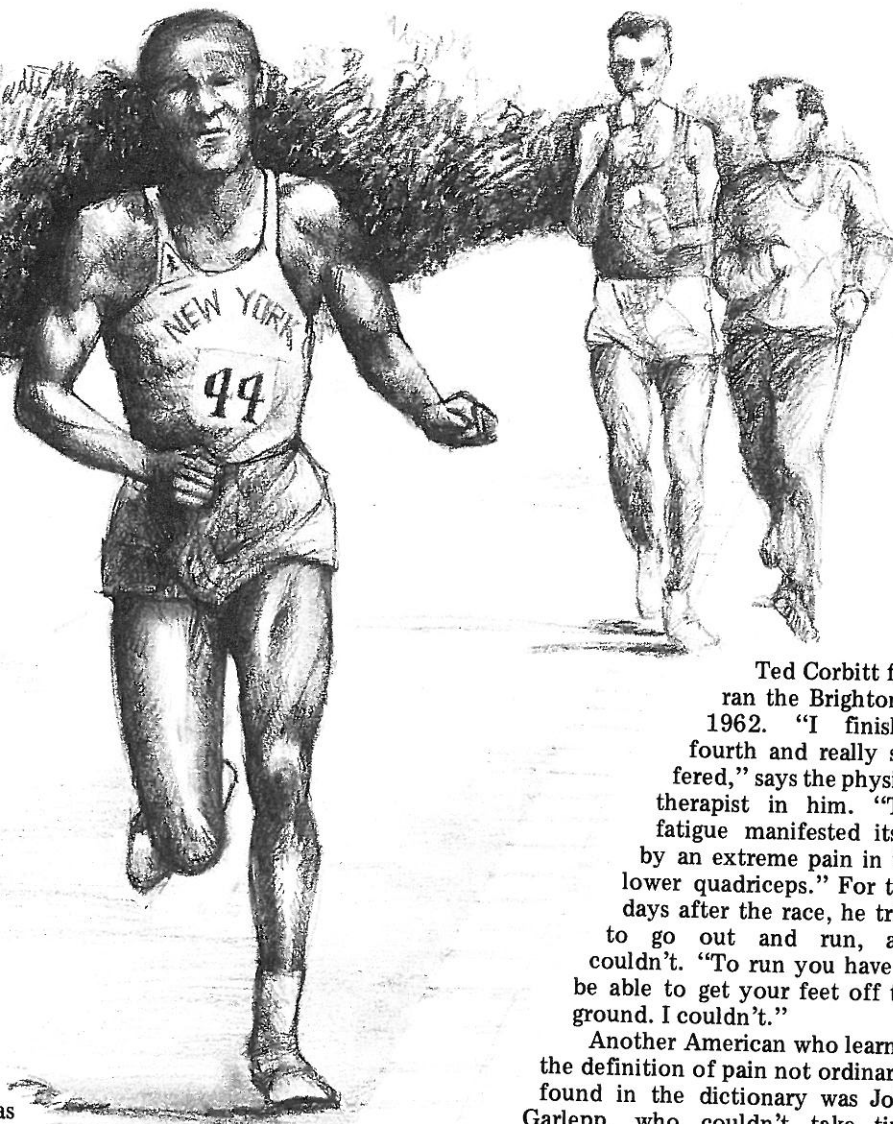


miles? Bernard quite frankly admits it is the only distance he ever clicked at. Although he has run a reasonably fast (for a marathoner) 4:35 mile, his swiftest clocking for three miles is a non-Ron Clarkian 15:30, and his marathon best is a barely respectable 2:31.

"With all due respects to Bernard Gomersall," said J.R. Brandon, a bearded runner for the team champion Cheltenham and County Harriers, "he could no more win a 15-mile race in this country than fly."

In general, super-marathoners are older than regular marathoners, who are older than 10,000-meter men, who are older than milers, who as youths (if they ran at all) could find no races other than midget 60-yard dashes. Ted Corbitt's first track and field competition was an intramural 60-yard dash in junior high school, and he won. Born 45 years ago on a farm in South Carolina, Corbitt ran the 220-yard dash while attending the University of Cincinnati and graduated to long-distance running only after a tour in the Navy during the war. He has finished sixth in the Boston Marathon three times, once unofficially when the examining doctors at the start thought his heart just didn't sound right. Since then he always brings his own medical certificate to races, and sits around nervously quiet until he has been approved.

**A**s a member of the American Olympic team in 1952, Corbitt placed 44th at Helsinki in time slower than he now hits on the way to 52 miles. He runs 100 miles a week and occasionally 200 miles. On certain days he will rise at four in the morning and cover 30 miles by first doing 52 laps around a 440-yard track near his home in the Bronx, then running around the bottom of Manhattan to the Institute for Crippled and Disabled Children, where he works as a physical therapist. In preparing for this year's Brighton, over the Labor Day weekend he had three 60-mile days in succession, each workout taking over 10 hours, during which period all he did was wake, eat, run, eat, and then fall back in bed to rest for the following day's workout. Corbitt has a 14-year-old son, Gary, who is also interested in track.



Ted Corbitt first ran the Brighton in 1962. "I finished fourth and really suffered," says the physical therapist in him. "The fatigue manifested itself by an extreme pain in the lower quadriceps." For two days after the race, he tried to go out and run, and couldn't. "To run you have to be able to get your feet off the ground. I couldn't."

Another American who learned the definition of pain not ordinarily found in the dictionary was John Garlepp, who couldn't take time from his job as an elevator repairman in the Seventh Avenue garment district and flew to London only the Thursday night before the Saturday race, getting no sleep on the plane and arriving Friday morning. That night he retired in his London hotel at eight, only to awaken three hours later. Because of the time difference, it was then six in the evening in New York, and he couldn't get back to sleep. He eventually dragged out of bed at 5:30 a.m. for a pre-race meal, only to be confronted by the typical continental breakfast of tea and toast. Garlepp finally talked the waiter into bringing two raw eggs, which he drank with apparent relish.

He led the mid-way point, then faded. Three runners passed him in the last mile while he was walking. He sprinted the last few hundred yards only to lose ninth place by the width of a quadricep. He slumped onto the first flat surface which happened to be a table and moaned: "I almost fell asleep on the road."

**A**t one point he got a cramp in his stomach, undoubtedly the aftermath of those raw eggs. In an attempt to relieve it, Garlepp lay down by the side of the road and attempted to sit up. He not only failed in this, but couldn't get back to his feet. He had to roll over on his stomach and rise, using his knees. Later he slowed to a walk while accepting a glass of water. "You're not going to pack it in, are you?" asked an official. "What do you mean," snorted Garlepp. "I didn't come all this way to quit. It's either do or die!"