

After 40 years, 193 marathons and 125,000 miles, he is still driven to the finish line

THE PRIVATE OBSESSION OF TED CORBITT

BY JONATHAN BLACK

The darkening skies created a cold, forbidding backdrop as the 15 men crouched at the line, then bolted away at the sound of the starter's pistol. Circling the quarter-mile track at Walton-on-Thames, England, in August of 1973, few of the 15 dared contemplate the enormity of the ordeal ahead. They ran through the twilight, through evening, toward midnight and beyond.

At 81 miles, the great Gavin Riley, his pace slowed to a humiliating shuffle, threw up his arms and stopped.

At a little after 100 miles, 24-year-old Joe Keating, the overwhelming favorite, staggered into the dressing room and collapsed on the floor. Three hours passed before he could be revived.

The remaining competitors continued. By the 20th hour, the lone American could no longer distinguish the bodies sprawled by trackside from the figures that crossed in front of him. He had become a glassy-eyed robot, shivering uncontrollably, lurching and tottering through the downpour that flooded the track. But still he ran.

That the American even finished the 24-hour run was amazing. That he finished third, logging 134.7 miles, was almost incomprehensible. That he could run for so long under these conditions at the age of 53 was the kind of achievement that has made Ted Corbitt a living legend in the world of distance running.

It is somewhat arbitrary to choose a single achievement that epitomizes the lifetime heroics of Ted Corbitt. A member of the 1952 Olympic team—he placed 44th in the marathon—Corbitt has held American records for almost every long distance event. In 1969, at age 49, he ran in a 100-mile race in England and clipped an astounding three *hours* off the American record.

He has competed in 193 marathons and ultra-marathons and has probably run more miles than almost any man in history: by various estimates, more than 120,000. Even his training runs are epic. Getting in shape for fall competition a few seasons ago, Ted regularly whipped off two 31-mile loops around Manhattan Island in the scorching heat of August.

Dr. Norbert Sander, a top marathoner and director of The Preventive

Sports Medicine Center, remembers watching Corbitt trot by him in Van Cortlandt Park in the Bronx. "I thought running two hours was a big deal then," Sander recalled. "And I'd hear that this guy was running from the Tappan Zee Bridge to Van Cortlandt to Battery Park. And back. I thought, 'That's inconceivable. It's *madness*.'"

Corbitt seems propelled by an almost totally internal compulsion, a quiet obsession buried too deep for public scrutiny. He is notoriously taciturn, a publicity-shy, self-effacing man who would seem to prefer total anonymity to suffering even the most gentle probes of an interview. Ask him a question and he turns away or casts his eyes to the floor. Each thought, each sentence seems laboriously dredged into daylight.

"He's not an easy guy to talk to," says Gary Muhreke, the winner of the first New York City Marathon, with considerable understatement. Muhreke tells the story of the time Olympic marathoner Ron Daws wrote to Corbitt for training advice and was pleased to receive a long, detailed reply, the first exchange in what would grow to a voluminous correspondence. But when the two runners finally met at the 1968 Olympic trials, "There was no conversation. Corbitt nodded and that was that. They never spoke."

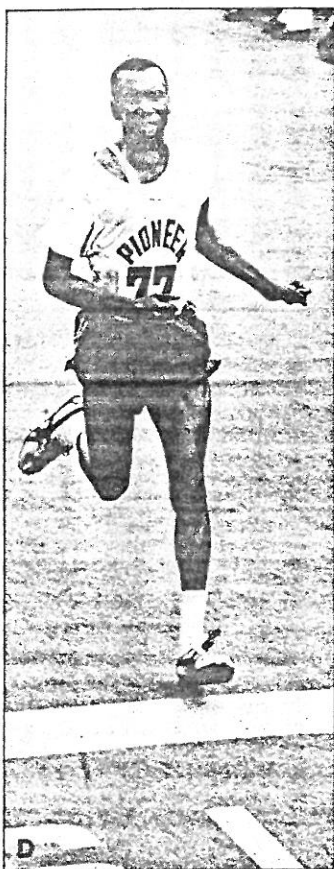
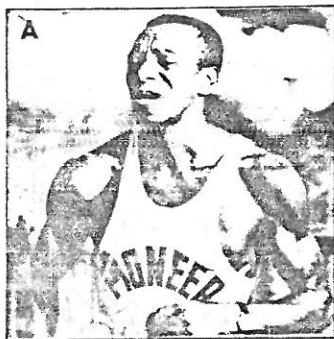
Corbitt's inflection varies little, whether he is describing the tiny bicycle calibrations that enable him to measure racecourses with mathematical precision or reliving the monumental battles with pain that typify so many of his marathons.

Meeting with Corbitt at New York's Institute for Crippled and Disabled Rehabilitation Center where he works as supervisory physical therapist, one is also struck by a fitting irony—that Corbitt tends the crippling ailments of others. Corbitt himself, in 40 years of running, has endured much more than his share of pain and disabling injury.

Consider this fact: Corbitt has *never* dropped out of a race. Once Corbitt ran in a 52.5-mile race against rival Jim McDonagh in 90-degree heat and was nearly crippled by blisters and dehydration. At 45 miles, intense exhaustion and convulsing thigh muscles brought him to a standstill for the first time in his long career. But Ted Corbitt would not quit. He gave his jerking muscles a few sharp karate

Jonathan Black is a free-lance writer living in New York.

Highlighting Ted Corbitt's career... A) In a 50-mile track event in England B) With his New York Pioneer Club teammate, John Sterner, in Laitila, Finland in 1952, following the Olympics in Helsinki, C) Winning the National AAU 50-mile championship in 1968 in Poughkeepsie, New York. D) Finishing 168th in the 1972 Boston Marathon. E) At the statue of Paavo Nurmi outside the Olympic Stadium in Helsinki, in '52. F) Number 999 in the 1952 Olympic Marathon, he finished 44th in 2:51:09.



chops, then, slowly, painfully, began to move again. He trotted, walked, tottered—but persevered to a second-place finish.

“I never had an excuse to stop,” he says quietly, “other than the fact that I was suffering. And that’s not good enough.”

Corbitt speaks haltingly, in an almost apologetic tone. The pain he discounts in his running arises frequently in his voice, or in his expression—as when he raises his thin, elegant fingers and grips the bridge of his nose, eyes clasped shut, reliving . . . what? Perhaps the accumulated wear and tear of 40 years’ running. Perhaps just another day’s fatigue. Or maybe reviewing his life is sometimes difficult because, despite the stunning achievements, Corbitt can’t help but dwell on the disappointments.

Someone else would have been satisfied to earn a place on the 1952 Olympic team; instead, Corbitt remembers the ’56 Olympic Trials, when he missed a berth on the team by one man.

“It was like being in mourning,” Corbitt recalls. “It was a real live depression; it lasted for weeks. My father died three years ago and the pain wasn’t nearly as sharp. I put in four years of training. The opposition was formidable, but winning was within my grasp.” Similarly, Corbitt views his superhuman effort during the 24-hour run—in which he missed the world record—as “my most disappointing result. Maybe I waited too late in life. Maybe it was just the accumulation of stress.”

Perhaps Corbitt’s keenest frustration—also his most magnificent accomplishment—is the London-to-Brighton 52.5-mile international classic. U.S. ultra-marathoning was still in its infancy when Corbitt first ran this super-endurance challenge in 1962. But in England long distance running was already celebrated, and the British were prepared to appreciate the purity of Corbitt’s obsession. In five attempts he garnered three second-place finishes, an accomplishment that Dr. Sander likens to an American soccer team somehow reaching the World Cup finals.

Corbitt’s efforts on the road to Brighton symbolized the kind of endurance only the truly inspired can sustain. In the 1965 race, Corbitt suffered a painfully wrenched ankle after only half the race; with 14 miles to go, his arch collapsed. He hobbled the remaining miles on the side of his foot to finish second, only four minutes behind the winner. In

1969, the race was the first half of what is reverently remembered today as Corbitt's "Incredible Double." On September 28, he clocked his best time ever at Brighton; three weeks later, against the world's top ultra-marathoners, Corbitt finished third in the harrowing Walton-on-Thames 100-miler.

Yet the ultimate thrill of a London-to-Brighton triumph eluded Ted. Particularly disappointing was Ted's last shot, in 1969 at age 50. He had established a murderous training regime: in July alone he ran 1,000 miles. The next month a dog attacked him and Corbitt's ankle was badly injured. But in September he was back in form and knocked off three consecutive 70-mile runs in 90-degree heat.

In the race Ted faced an elite international field including Dave Box, John "Ghost" Tarrant and Dave Bagshaw. He survived three devastating fatigue crises, but as he ran the last few miles, all hope of winning gone, he succumbed to what his biographer, John Chodes, describes as "a veil of despair, a depression that immediately brought an exhaustion so intense he almost came to a stop."

Ted Corbitt was born January 31, 1920, on a small family farm near Dunbarton, South Carolina, the eldest of two sisters and one brother. John Henry Corbitt, his father, was a part-time preacher and full-time farmer. His mother, Alma Bing, was a strong-willed woman with ambitions for her children.

Helping with farm work inured the young Corbitt to physical exertion. Running several miles to school each day (the white children were bussed) gave him a taste for running.

When the Depression knocked the bottom out of agricultural prices, John Henry Corbitt leased the farm and moved his family to Cincinnati. It was there, in high school, that Ted began running in earnest.

At the University of Cincinnati, Corbitt's potential bloomed. It was here, too, that Corbitt first confronted the "color bar," a whites-only segregation policy which prevented him from running in many interstate meets and competitions.

In his junior year, however, the status of track was elevated at Cincinnati and the team's new coach dropped segregationist schools from the schedule.

"By the end of his senior year," says Chodes, "Ted had developed into the most versatile athlete on the team. He was the best sprinter, quarter-miler and

distance man at the school."

Corbitt graduated as an honor student in 1942. He waited to be drafted. At his pre-induction physical, however, X-rays revealed a right lung badly scarred by tuberculosis. Yet when Corbitt took a similar physical at the city health clinic, the lungs were clear, as they were when the Army called him back for a re-examination in 1944.

After his 1946 Army stint, Ted settled in New York City and joined the Pioneer Club, the track club founded in 1930 by a black mortician, Joe Yancey. In training for long distance running then, Ted became a disciple of the great Czech runner Emil Zatopek. He adopted Zatopek's progression-resistance techniques, took to running 15-mile workouts in army combat boots, and was among the first American marathoners to incorporate speedwork into their training.

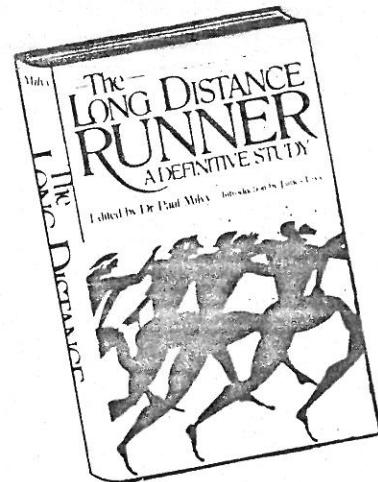
During the next few years, Corbitt emerged as a premier marathoner. In 1951, in his first marathon ever, Corbitt finished 15th with a time of 2:48:42. The next year, as a member of the Olympic team, he finished 44th at Helsinki with a time of 2:51:09. Then from 1953 through 1959, Corbitt won eleven of the 32 26.2-mile marathons in which he competed; in those races he also finished second five times, third five times, and never placed lower than 12th. His all-time best time of 2:26:28 placed him second in the Valley Forge Marathon in Pennsylvania in 1953. Corbitt's last marathon victory came in 1962 when he won his fourth title in the Shanahan Marathon in Philadelphia.

That was also the year Corbitt helped found New York's Road Runners Club, and the year he moved from Brooklyn to the Bronx, where he lives today in a modest three-room apartment.

The night I joined Corbitt there for dinner, he arrived two hours late. His wife Ruth nodded compliantly when Corbitt waved away a plate of cooked potatoes she was about to add to the plates of raw vegetables laid out on the table. "No more cooked food for a while," Corbitt said to her.

Corbitt put the vegetables—fresh tomatoes, cucumbers, celery, squash and carrots—into a blender. He sliced a steamed zucchini, making an instant exception to his own ban on cooked foods. "The point of the diet is rejuvenation," he said, "rejuvenation of the body's cells. With cooked food you destroy some of the vital elements. At 120 degrees, enzymes are destroyed by heat. It's all from Dr. Roger Williamson's book, *The Wonderful*

FOR THE SERIOUS RUNNER



\$15 Hardcover 640 pages

This book contains all you want to know about running. Highly informative and detailed articles by running experts such as Drs. Sheehan, Subotnick, Kostrubala, Schuster, Costill, Bassler and many others on the most recent research on long distance running.

Recently offered in its more technical version for \$75. by the New York Academy of Sciences, now available with their permission for only \$15 640 pages, illustrations.

"Great value—the first intensive study prepared for the long distance runner."
—Fred Lebow

"A heroic effort."

—Dr. George Sheehan

"This is an extraordinary book."

—James Fixx

"Contains a great deal of invaluable information."
—Dr. Nina Kuscik

Please send me _____ copies
of *The Long Distance Runner*.
Enclosed is \$15.00 per copy. TR

Mail to: Urizen Books, 66 West
Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10007

"I never had an excuse to stop other than the fact that I was suffering. And that's not good enough."

World Within You.

Sitting alone at his dining room table, Corbitt appeared dwarfed by the dozens and dozens of trophies that rise around him.

Every bookshelf, every niche, every available surface was topped with bronzed runners, silvered laurel leaves, three-columned temples with soaring eagles perched atop. I asked Corbitt about a particularly dramatic, multi-tiered silver and green monster of a trophy, only one of his collection.

"I have no idea what that's for," he said almost apologetically. "I've brought medals home, stuck them in drawers and never looked at them again."

"We have plenty stored up," affirmed Ruth. "Enough to fill a barrel."

"I gave a lot away," Corbitt continued. "I started giving away trophies in 1944. Most of them are junk anyway. Often you're lucky to get them home in one piece."

When the meal was finished, Corbitt got out some scrapbooks, apologizing for not keeping better running diaries. ("I didn't want to dwell on my injuries," said Corbitt, cracking a rare, ironic smile.) The scrapbooks displayed a young, aggressive-looking Corbitt breaking the wire under banners that read, variously, Yonkers, Shanahan, Cherry Tree. Looking at this healthy, powerful runner, Corbitt reflected—if he had it to do over again—that he wouldn't push and punish himself quite so severely. Maybe less extreme training mileage and fewer experiments on his own body would have reduced the plague of injuries.

Is there any race in the scrapbooks Corbitt remembers with special pride? "I wouldn't use the word 'proud,'" he said. But then he told me about the 1968 National AAU 50-mile Championship in Poughkeepsie, New York.

Ted had been through a bruising summer. Training for the London-to-Brighton race, Corbitt had again been attacked by a dog. Recovery was slow, excruciating. Two months later he hobbled through his first competition, the 37.5-mile Peekskill-to-Yonkers. With only six weeks left before the 50-miler, Corbitt began to train like a maniac. The race shaped up as a duel with Wayne Van Dellen, a powerful Californian and 2:22 marathoner. For 45 miles they were never more than 200 yards apart. Corbitt discovered Van Dellen was at his weakest running downhill. He set out to break Van Dellen by spurring ahead at each descent. Inexorably, Van Dellen clawed

his way back on each uphill. Corbitt remembers growing discouraged, conceding his sprinting gamble had failed. But at 46 miles, "just to annoy" Van Dellen, Corbitt rushed past him on one final tortuous downhill. Van Dellen never caught up.

Today, at 58, Corbitt admits he's working to get back in shape. Dr. Roy Siegel is helping him by trying to cure Corbitt's debilitating sore hip. "I haven't been worth two cents since the 24-hour run," says Corbitt, who also suffers from a bad knee, injured ankle and chronic lung ailment. But even as he drags his aching limbs to the doctor, Corbitt talks of ambitious plans: the Pikes Peak marathon, a 24-hour walk and perhaps a cross-country run. Across *the country*, that is.

In Siegel's waiting room, Corbitt cautiously removes the battered orange Nike running shoes, a gift from an admirer. The Nikes are Corbitt's on-the-job shoes; while running he prefers crepe-soled street shoes. ("They're kinder to your feet," he says.) As he removes the custom-made arch supports, he recalls his childhood in Cincinnati, where he spent a lot of time riding through the streets in a red wagon, looking for firewood, coasting down hills, racing friends. Those were the years, says Corbitt, when irreparable damage was done to his right foot.

Because of his singular means of propulsion—left leg pushing, right leg splayed crookedly in the wagon—the bones in his right foot slowly twisted. Corbitt demonstrates this slightly unnatural angle and shakes his head. "I lost a lot of power. I lost at least one inch per stride."

Early attempts to re-align the foot via exercise and corrective running failed, and Corbitt has long since resigned himself to the impediment.

Siegel is more concerned with a swollen ankle. "You've been getting enough protein?"

"Two raw egg yolks for breakfast," Corbitt replies. "Sunflower seeds for lunch. Pine nuts for supper."

"How about water? You drinking a lot?"

"I haven't drunk any water in two weeks," says Corbitt.

"Oh my God," says the doctor.

Corbitt's current diet scheme, he explains to Siegel, is the work of a nutritionist who persuaded him to fast when he weighed only 108 pounds. (He now weighs 120.) Corbitt spent a recent vacation at a Catskill fast farm, where he shed

another 12 pounds from his 5'9" frame on a rice-and-water diet. But the sight of Corbitt's lithe, smoothly-muscled body is sufficient to defray any undue alarm. Like everyone else who knows Corbitt, Siegel assumes this man could probably step from the *grave* and run a marathon.

Corbitt's awesome recovery power was probed in 1968 by Dr. David Costill of Ball State University's Human Performance Laboratory. "So highly adapted is his rate of recovery," wrote Costill, "that after running to exhaustion twice in one day at our lab (on an inclined treadmill), he was able to place second in a 30-mile race the following day and improved his best time by ten minutes."

Costill discovered that Corbitt had an extraordinarily high oxygen intake capacity—some 66 milliliters of oxygen per minute—six more than seven-time Boston marathon winner Clarence DeMar. The average 48-year-old male consumes about 34 milliliters per minute. Dr. Costill also noted Corbitt's inefficient running style, which he described as "terrible, abnormal, he *pounds* the ground."

Dr. George Sheehan is similarly struck by Corbitt's highly unorthodox style. "He's got this peculiar, short, flat-footed gait," marvels Sheehan. "You can't understand why he's passing you. You're even *more* amazed when he disappears into the distance." Sheehan remembers quite vividly his first competitive run-in with Corbitt during a 1963 race in New York's Van Cortlandt Park. "It was the worst race I ever ran. From the very start he (Corbitt) was at my shoulder, groaning. I'd never experienced anything like that before. Two miles of *groaning*, six inches from my ear. Subsequently I've learned to groan myself. It's a great psychological tactic."

"It looks and sounds as if he's *dying*," agrees Corbitt's son, Gary, who frequently accompanies his father on races and training runs. "You'd think the way he looked he couldn't even *talk*. But somehow he always manages to recover quickly."

To appreciate Corbitt's place in the pantheon of running, one need only drop by New York's Road Runners Club. Back in 1958, long distance running was hobbling along, eclipsed by more "glamorous" track and field events. Only once every four years—during Olympic anticipation—did marathon running receive attention. Dedicated distance runners had to scour the country to enter one of

the five AAU-certified marathons.

No wonder that when Browning Ross transplanted his British Road Runners Club (RRC) to this country that year and needed a respected figure to head it, he turned to Corbitt.

Corbitt accepted the RRC presidency reluctantly, apprehensive that administrative chores would disrupt his running. (They did, and do.) But once at the helm, Corbitt turned to the tasks before him with a vengeance. He published a spate of informational booklets—on training, diet, racing strategy—and created an impressive runners' library. Singlehandedly Ted wrote, edited and distributed the quarterly RRC newsletter. From a single mimeographed sheet, the newsletter grew to a 60-page compendium of events and runners' miscellany. ("He writes three out of four articles," says Norbert Sander. "Of course nobody knows, because he never signs his name. We call him the phantom of the opera.")

In its early years, the Road Runners Club was a cozy, claquish band of runners who met after races in the McCombs Dam Park locker room and fretted about humbly petitioning the AAU for a few long distance runs. Today, the AAU battles won, RRC oversees close to 200 marathons and ultra-marathons. The current president, Fred Lebow, credits Corbitt with much of the accomplishment.

He praises the "totally dedicated" Corbitt for helping to establish the first New York City Marathon (this year's has more than 10,000 entries), encouraging women's running at a time when it was meeting heavy resistance, and helping to guide the organization through the controversy surrounding the RRC's alignment with commercial sponsors. It was Corbitt, too, who laid out the 1976 Bicentennial New York Marathon course that ingeniously snaked through all five boroughs. "He's the one person I turn to," says Lebow, "when I need advice and counsel."

Today, Corbitt's chief contribution to the RRC takes the form of insuring that every marathon it sponsors measures exactly 26 miles 385 yards. In the first six months of 1978, Corbitt's Standards Committee certified no fewer than 70 marathons and 10,000-meter courses. The job is not easy. (Early on, Corbitt discovered that some American odometer measurements were deliberately deceptive, to give car owners a false impression of better mileage. American runners competing for the first time in Europe, where automobile odometers

are apparently accurate, found their times up to 12 minutes slower.)

Corbitt attacked the problem with typical exactitude. First he laid down a 300-foot steel tape and calibrated a bicycle odometer to it, checking and rechecking the calibrations. He even wrote a booklet: *How to Measure a Road Course*.

Fred Lebow likes to tell of the time that runners' lanes were painted at a Central Park finish line before Corbitt had had a chance to certify the course. When he did, he discovered that the lanes were two yards short at the finish. "What do two yards matter in a marathon?" a smiling Lebow remembers asking Corbitt. But Corbitt would not yield. The lanes were repainted.

As recently as last May, Ted Corbitt ran in the Yonkers Marathon—despite injuries, poor health and miserable weather. "It was awful," Corbitt recalled. "It was cold. The whipping wind

made the rain ice."

But the ever-vigilant Corbitt could not resist checking the course he'd recently certified. New construction might easily have deprived the route of a curve—and ten or 12 yards. Even repaving could knock off a critical yard or two. The only way to really check was to run every one of those 26 miles 385 yards. And Ted Corbitt did, struggling to the finish (in time 4:11:45) but satisfied that he had found the course intact.

Running, it seems, will continue to be a struggle for Ted Corbitt. "A lot of people might think he's through," says his son, Gary. "But if anyone can come back, he can."

Even if—despite it all—he does come back, chances are Corbitt will keep the story to himself. For years friends have implored him to write his autobiography. He rejects the idea.

"There's just not enough there," he says. **FINISH**

DEATH OF THE TRACK STAR

It all happens in a moment, telephone-still.
He leans backward across 30 years in his padded
swivel chair, back toward his high school track.

A magnet pulls at him again
from the finish line, the metal
of his legs is bending, churning.
He feels the choirs of wheezing,
a chestful of cinders.
This is real running, he thinks, his heart
beating hard in his heels.

The crowd arches
as he breaks string after string
with his toughened throat and

For an instant he almost believes
he has lived the best possible life—
success pours across the desk in front of him, visible
as spilled coffee. It is the stain
of winning.

He feels a broken glass trophy putting itself
back together again
inside his body. And applause,
like a balloon of light,
surrounds each muscle.

Now his legs can soften into two blue silk ribbons
rippling in the breeze.

he smiles, and suddenly inhales
all the breaths
he has ever exhaled in his life.

William Meissner