

TED CORBITT IS A QUIET, UNASSUMING MAN... BUT OVER THE LAST THIRTY YEARS HE'S DRAWN ON RESERVES OF PHYSICAL STAMINA MOST PEOPLE CAN ONLY DREAM OF.

THE GENTLE KILLER

by Bill Morris

When you think of strength in athletic terms, certain images probably come to mind—Eric Heiden, with the legs of a thoroughbred, powerfully and smoothly gliding over the ice to win five Olympic Gold Medals; Bruce Jenner pushing, leaping, throwing, running and jumping, straining, and winning the Olympic decathlon. That's strong. So are the Dallas Cowboy's Too Tall Jones and Oakland's Ted Hendricks smashing opposing behemoths on Sunday afternoons; that's strong too.

There is another kind of strength, a kind which embodies both physical characteristics and characteristics of mind and spirit. These are found in ample supply in the 5'9", 123-pound body and mind of one Theodore "Ted" Corbitt. Ted who?

In his 61 years, Ted Corbitt has run 196 marathons (including 22 Bostons) and ultra-marathons, his last the 1980 Honolulu Marathon. His often tired and aching body has traveled well over 100,000 miles and has sustained more injuries than he would care to remember. While he has had his share of rewards, running has made him hurt, and hurt, and hurt. EXAMPLE: The 1980 New York Mara-

thon. Corbitt readily admits, "I wasn't ready, but I decided to do it anyway to see what I could do." Fresh and recurring injuries, especially a particularly painful hip, had kept him sidelined for months, with only minimal training. The race went fairly well until about the midway point. "I tripped... on the 59th Street Bridge. I lost a toe nail. I had to stop and take my insert out and limp in." Take his insert out? Limp in? After losing a toenail? EXAMPLE: The 1965 London-to-Brighton 52.5-mile International Classic. Halfway through the race, one marathon down, one to go, Corbitt sprained an ankle. With painful step after painful step, he kept going. The pain did not lessen. Twelve miles later, his arch collapsed. The pain was almost unbearable. Ted Corbitt kept moving forward. He didn't quit. He finished, limping and hobbling, just four minutes behind the first-place runner. EXAMPLE: His race schedule would read to some like a horror story. With few exceptions, most world-class marathoners limit themselves to one or two important races each year. Not Corbitt—he ran four marathons in 1951 (his first year), 4 in '52, 5 in '55, 7 in '58, 10 in '63, 12 in '64 and '65, 13 in '66... and on and on and on, marathons and ultras.

In his years of running, Corbitt has

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held his share of titles: The U.S. track record at 25 miles, at 26.2, at 40 and 50 miles; the Canadian Marathon title; National Road Runners Club ultra-marathon champ; National 30-Kilometer Champ; he is the record holder for most marathons completed.

In 1969, along with 15 of the best ultra-men in the world, he ran 400 times around a quarter-mile track, 100 grueling miles, at Walton-on-Thames, England. He placed third. It really didn't matter, though, because he had chopped three hours off the American record for 100 miles, had done it at age 49, was the oldest man in the race, and had done it in his first attempt at this distance.

When *City Limits* assigned me to profile Ted Corbitt in connection with this year's 85th running of the Boston Marathon, I first read as much as I could about the man, including newspaper and magazine articles and John Chodes' biography—a meticulous and loving account of Corbitt's life on the run.

It was clear Corbitt was a world-class runner, even though he had not won Boston. He'd won his share of marathons elsewhere. He had his share of trophies and records, but I began to sense, just by the sheer number of races he entered, that winning was not everything to Ted Corbitt. A second thing that came through, too, loud and clear from those who knew him: he's shy, not a talker.

Research completed, and with idea firmly implanted in my head, I called Corbitt at home on a Sunday night to request an interview. I half expected to be turned down, or put off. When he answered, I couldn't quite believe the voice on the other end of the line—so quiet, so low, so unimposing. I had to work, almost strain to hear him. "Mr. Corbitt, Mr. Ted Corbitt?" Pause. "Yes." The reply seemed to come from a million miles away. I was taken aback. How could a man who clearly was so strong, so full of life and experiences, how could he speak so softly? I explained the purpose of my call, and immediately I was struck by the volume of my own voice. It seemed to me to be thundering; yet, I was asking myself if Ted Corbitt was listening. He heard me, though, and when I asked for an appointment for an interview, there was a pause, as there had been before each response to each question. "Well, yes... I can see you tomorrow between 5 and 6 at the Institute." Taken aback again. A man who was supposed to be very shy, averse to interviews, who preferred anonymity to public exposure and scrutiny had, just like that, said yes to an interview with a total stranger. Surprised again!

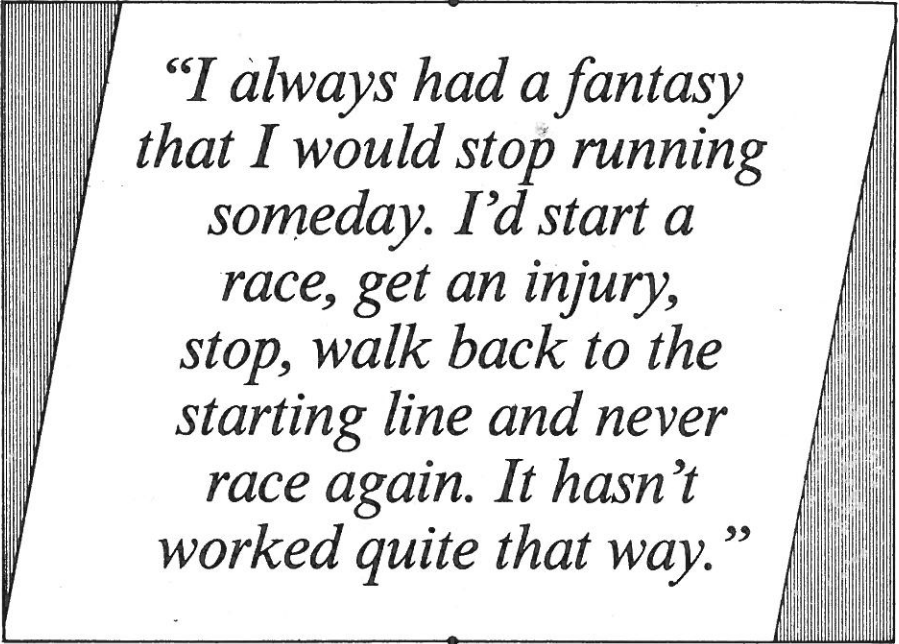
The Institute Ted Corbitt referred to is the Institute for Crippled and Disabled

Rehabilitation and Research Center on East 24th Street in New York City. He is chief physical therapist and has worked there 31 years, since March, 1949, tending and healing others in physical pain.

The following evening, about ten till five, I arrived on the fourth floor of the Institute with notebook and tape recorder in hand. What quotes I might get, I felt, would be few and far between, and certainly brief. I wanted them right, every last syllable.

His office, I was told, was just off the gymnasium floor. As I turned the corner from the hall leading into the gym and looked into the adjacent office, there was the man I had read and heard so much about. I asked, "Mr. Corbitt?" The reply,

school in the same town... but not much. I explained that at one time, I too had been a runner. My first marathon was Boston, 1978. His first had been Boston '51, 27 years before me. He began to talk about the race, about other Bostons, and as he did his hand slowly went to his forehead, his fingers rubbing... then he would slowly let his fingers drop over his nose and face as he thought and answered my questions. His eyes would close at times, and as he spoke, he seemed to relax. He laughed often throughout the interview, a light, almost nervous laugh. Often I felt it was at something he was thinking to himself, some memory somewhere back in those 61 years... somewhere in those 196 marathons and ultras



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like those on the telephone the night before was low in volume, and halting.

His office is a cramped space holding a couple of desks, filing cabinets and stacks and stacks of papers, books, and pamphlets on physical therapy. I plugged in the recorder, mind whirring all the while as to what to ask this gentle man, how to get some conversation going. I put the notebook aside. I felt it would be a distraction, and I felt somehow uncomfortable with it in my hands. The recorder was going; it would capture what there would be of this conversation.

He told me he had to leave promptly at six to see a private patient elsewhere in Manhattan. Time would be short and I figured I needed all the time in the world to draw this man out.

We began talking, just in general terms, about his years at the Institute, about his son Gary who had graduated from Howard University in Washington, D.C. I had graduated from American University there, so I seized on the opportunity of something of a common thread to try to get conversation going. It helped that his son and I had gone to

... somewhere in those 100,000-plus miles.

I asked Theodore Corbitt: What makes him run? "It's an inner urge," he told me, "something from the head. I had this (feeling) before I ever ran in a formal race. I did a lot of running on the farm... as a kid to get to school or go to the grocery store or go out to the mail box, that sort of thing. This is a part of me, a feeling from within. Before I even saw a formal race, we were racing, as kids. I just had this feeling."

Ted Corbitt was born and spent the early years of his life on the family farm in Dunbarton, South Carolina. It was here that the spirit to run first materialized. He ran along Dunbarton's dirt roads with friends to do errands, to get to school. Black kids weren't allowed to ride the school buses that took the white kids to school; black kids walked, hitched a ride in a wagon, or in Ted's case, ran, or they didn't go to school. Not too many folks cared if the son of a black cotton farmer got an edu-

cation. But Ted's parents did, especially his mother, who saw to it he finished school. It was her drive and encouragement that saw Ted continue through junior high and high school while his friends dropped out. Then she pushed, shoved, cajoled and encouraged him to enroll at the University of Cincinnati. The Depression had forced his father to sell their farm in South Carolina and move his family to Cincinnati.

It was during his junior high and high school years in Cincinnati that Ted was first exposed to formal running competition, through area recreation department meets. Then he saw films of the 1932 Olympics and the urge to run gelled in him more. At Woodward High he ran relays, hurdles, the half mile and mile, and excelled at each.

But it was not until 1936 that he gave any thought to long distance running. It was a picture of Ellison "Tarzan" Brown in the Cincinnati *Inquirer* winning the Boston Marathon that year that piqued his interest: "That's when I really became aware of the marathon. I had seen the '32 Olympic film, but I don't remember seeing the marathon. Then I saw the '36 Olympic film. I thought it was fantastic that anyone could run that far, because we were struggling with the mile at the time. I had done a lot of walking in my life, never that far, but I could appreciate that this was a tremendous feat, and that was the thing that intrigued me. I wanted to see if I could do it."

It would be 15 years before Ted Corbitt would see if he could do it. In between would come four years at the University of Cincinnati, graduating as an honor student, a stint in the Pacific at the close of World War II with the Army, an odd job here and there, marriage, graduate school and the beginning of a career as a physical therapist in New York.

All the while he kept running, primarily on his own. The "Color Line" was still up in many areas, and for the first two years at U of C, he and other blacks were barred from competing in interstate A.A.U. meets. The color line fell in his junior and senior years, and he excelled.

As he began his career in New York, though, he still found that blacks were not welcome in some areas of track and field. The same was not so true in road racing, though, so Ted Corbitt poured all his energies into long distance running. He had never forgotten that 1936 photo of "Tarzan" Brown winning the Boston Marathon, and he set his sights on running Boston. True to form, he methodically calculated what it would take in time, energy, and training to get ready for his first marathon, Boston 1951.

"It was either late March or early April, 1950, that I started training with the idea of running Boston in 1951. I had

run enough and experimented enough that I figured I needed a year of training with that race in mind, and that's what I did. I trained a year."

"My goal was to run 30 miles non-stop. I had been able to run 20 miles, but I didn't seem to be able to get much further. I failed a number of times between 20 and 22 miles."

As 1950 began to close, Ted Corbitt wondered if he would ever get past 22 miles, much less his goal of 30. Would he ever see Boston, 1951? Would he ever see Boston at all?

Those were days of infancy for American long distance running. Marathons were few, as were marathoners. Learning resources to would-be marathoners were also scarce. A voracious reader all his life, Corbitt came upon the writings of Emil Zatopek, the great Czech distance runner and Olympic Gold Medalist in the '48 Marathon. Zatopek had developed a training program based on repetition and progression, on slowly building up the runner's workload.

Corbitt took the idea of progression, applied it to his training schedule, and went Zatopek one better. Corbitt ran in combat boots to strengthen his leg muscles. He incorporated into his regimen another Zatopek principle, the addition of speed work to long distance running. Corbitt thus became one of the first Americans to employ speed training for marathon running.

On he ran, through the hot summer of 1950, into fall and winter ... adding mileage ... adding speedwork ... adding combat boots ... building leg muscles ... making them strong...

But Corbitt was also running out of time. He was working days as a therapist, finishing his Masters, and running when he could in Prospect Park in Brooklyn, his home.

One cold winter's day, paydirt. "It was either late January or early February, 1951. I remember the day. It had started to snow. I was running, trying for 30 miles again, and about the 15-mile mark I began to tire as usual. I just started sticking my tongue out to catch snow flakes and it suddenly dawned on me that I was probably thirsty. I didn't feel thirsty, but I figured maybe this might make the difference."

It did.

With his training in physical therapy, Ted Corbitt knew of the principle of dehydration; he just never thought it was happening to him. But it was. Running, even in winter, he perspired, and his body craved replenishment of the lost liquids. From that time on, he placed water along his running route and regularly cracked the 30-mile barrier. Now he felt he was ready for Boston.

April 19, 1951. Harry Truman was in

the White House, American G.I.s were slogging through Korean mud, Ronald Reagan was president of the Screen Actors Guild. In Hopkinton, Massachusetts, 150 men, top marathoners from the U.S. and abroad, gathered to run 26.2 miles to downtown Boston in the 55th running of the Boston Marathon. They would travel through places that today are well known to thousands of runners and non-runners alike... through Framingham and Natick, past Wellesley College... through those wonderfully rolling hills of Newton, a beautiful four-mile stretch... over that last hump known as "Heartbreak Hill" and on to the 1951 finish line on Exeter Street.

Ted Corbitt was realizing the culmination of a 15-year dream on that day. This 31-year-old man from the South Carolina farm country was competing in his first marathon, right up there with some of the best. He was excited, as well he should have been. At noon, as had happened 54 times in the past, the starter's gun went off, and 150 pairs of feet pounded pavement leaving Hopkinton.

Running any marathon is far from easy: it takes training, determination, endurance and strength. Corbitt had these at his command. But throughout his running career, he had been plagued with injuries, as he would be the rest of his life. In this, his first marathon ever, he would not be spared. Twice, side stitches slowed him. Twice he waited them out, each time trying to regain the speed he had lost, each time losing just a bit. As the miles wore on, fatigue set in. Runners began to drop out, but Ted Corbitt ran on. "Passing people late in the race, I got a strange feeling. Before the race, I had had trouble believing I was as good as some of these other runners. Friends said I was. Seeing these other fellas, some of whom I knew had been around a while, seeing them in trouble, walking, stopping, whatever, I figured the same thing was going to happen to me, maybe in a mile, or sooner or later, just sort of a negative feeling in me. I just kept going."

Corbitt entered this Boston Marathon, he says, just to see if he could go the distance in a respectable time. He had no illusions of winning, or of even finishing that well. But he did have the will to finish. At one point, he felt someone on his heels, and that will came alive.

"I was pretty much alone the last four miles. There wasn't anybody in front of me, but somewhere someone else closed in on me from behind. I could tell by the cheering. The people started to cheer, but I couldn't tell if he was really that close or not. It turned out he was from the Millrose (Millrose Track Club) and he didn't gain that rapidly on me. I stayed out there in front."

The crowds that today line the entire length of the course are as much a part of the race as the runners. Today, Patriot's Day is a festive holiday, with thousands turning out with signs, water stations, oranges, encouragement. They sit on curbs and porches. 30 years ago it was different, but there were still people lining the race route. What did it feel like to Ted Corbitt to run among cheering people after so many hours running alone in Prospect Park, Brooklyn?

"The crowds were not as large as they got later. There were people on corners. But it was quite large compared to any other race. That helped me a lot. My suffering was certainly not as intense as it would have been without the crowds."

Ted Corbitt finished his first Boston Marathon, just as he planned to do. He came in in 15th place, in 2:48:52. 15th out of 150 of the strongest marathoners in the eastern United States and some of the best in the world. 15th in his very first marathon. How did he feel once across the finish line? "Emotional in a sense; yeah, sort of emotional. Not tears, but close."

In the two months following his first race, Ted ran two more marathons, an incredible load for a beginner. By then, though, he had set his sights on a berth in the 1952 U.S. Olympic team. A sixth place finish at a very hot Boston in April 1952, a third at Yonkers in May (both Olympic qualifying races), and Ted Corbitt had earned his spot on the Olympic team. He placed 44th overall in the marathon at Helsinki, not too bad for a man who had run his first marathon a little over a year before.

To say the marathon bug bit Ted Corbitt is an understatement. Through the fifties and sixties he ran more and more marathons and ultras, setting and attaining personal goals, filling his home with trophies, plaques, medals and awards. Through those years he refined his training techniques and passed on to countless other runners what he learned.

From 1951 until 1974, Corbitt ran Boston 22 times. Those races are filled with many fond memories. One came in 1958, when he and two others, John Lafferty and Al Confalone, failed the pre-race physical. Officials said heart murmurs were detected and Ted was told he had too high a pulse rate. "I was so depressed. Here we were, out in Hopkinton. I wanted to get back home to New York. So we decided to run unofficially. It was just a convenient way to get back to Boston. The day before the race, I had looked at the list of entries and realized if I could beat two men, I had a good chance at 4th place." (Those two men were Lafferty and Confalone, both Boston Athletic Association runners.) "At the starting line one of my teammates, a medical doctor, Charlie Robbins, took my pulse. It was

70. It was too late to do anything then. Funny, one of the last things I remember just before the start was Jock Semple saying 'Now run a good race.'" The results, unofficially of course . . . Corbitt placed 6th, Lafferty 7th and Confalone 9th.

Corbitt ran his best Boston in 1956, finishing 6th with a time of 2:28:06. It too was an Olympic qualifying race, and he had trained harder for it than ever before. But his time just wasn't fast enough. Ironically, his slowest time in Boston came in that '52 Olympic trial, 2:53:31, in near 90-degree heat. His best marathon time was in 1958 in Philadelphia, a 2:26:44.

Although he has run 196 marathons and ultras, Boston has a special appeal to

learn. I always had a sort of fantasy that I would stop running someday. I would start a race, get an injury or something like that, and stop and walk back to the starting line and never run again. It hasn't worked quite that way."

Pausing again, wiping his eyes and face, a face that looks much younger than its 61 years, he continues. "Even though I'm essentially shy, I'm also aggressive. Uh, young John Kelly (no relation to the elder statesman of Boston Marathoning) and some of the other fellas, I call them gentle killers. They are self-effacing on the surface, shy, gentle people. In a race though, they turn into killers. My teammate, Dr. Charlie Robbins, if you see him around, he never dressed fancy or any-

*Corbitt finished 15th
out of 150 in his
first marathon, 15th
among 150 of the strong-
est runners in the world.
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him, as it does for runners the world over.

"Boston is a lure (to me) and for long distance runners. I know many, many runners that want to run Boston, never get in shape, but run it anyway; and I know many, many more who want to but never will. I had a lot of successful races there. It's just a good race to run."

1974 was the last time he ran Boston. Injuries plagued him more and more as he drove himself through marathon after marathon and ultra after ultra. It's now seven years later: would he run Boston again? "Well, I won't say I wouldn't. But I'd rather not go back unless I can break 2:53. I ran 22 Bostons over 23 years and my times ranged between 2:28 and 2:53, a personal accomplishment that I consider significant. It has no meaning to anyone else, but it does for me. I might go back, if I could get in shape, if I felt I could break 2:53. Of course, if I don't do it soon, I might as well forget it."

Will he ever stop running? "I could, but I'll do something for endurance; walking or cycling. I'm not a good swimmer, although it might be a good time to

thing. You just never would picture this guy to be aggressive. He was a light trainer, so many times he wasn't fit, so he raced accordingly. But he won 12 national championships. When he was fit, he was ready to kill."

Ted Corbitt too.

He's been a student his entire life, a student of physical therapy, physiology, nutrition, running. What lies ahead for this remarkable man? Another Boston if he can meet his own tough standards. Definitely, he says, he'll run at least four more marathons to reach his personal goal of 200.

And always, he'll keep on learning. "I've studied some each year of my life. I'm sort of a perennial student. I keep studying to keep on learning about the body. I don't expect I'll ever stop. It's funny, I was thinking the other day." Pause, hand slowly rises to rub his face and forehead. "There's an old saying, 'Too soon old, too late smart.' So by the time I get a fair amount of knowledge in this (physical therapy), it will be time to retire . . . or something like that." □