

Marathon Man

BY GERALD COUZENS

On December 7th of last year, Ted Corbitt ran the slowest marathon of his life. Injuries have knocked him out of serious racing for the past few years. He suffers from a chronic back condition incurred from running on sidewalks and streets for a good portion of his adult life. A lung ailment that was probably triggered by anesthesia used in a hernia operation years ago makes breathing difficult. Corbitt thinks that training exclusively in New York City air may also have something to do with this problem. Still, on this early December morning in Honolulu, Corbitt covered the 26 mile, 385 yard distance in well over five hours of difficult non-stop running. In his prime, he could have almost doubled the distance in the same amount of time and hardly given it a second thought.

For more than 25 years Ted Corbitt, "The Father of Long Distance Racing in the U.S.," thrived on competitive running. The longer the distance, the more physical and mental the demands on the body and soul, the better. Corbitt rose to meet the challenge. Corbitt always taxed his slight 135 pound body to the fullest, whether it was an Olympic marathon — he finished 44th (2:51.09) in the 1952 games in Helsinki — the Boston Marathon, the 52.5 mile London-to-Brighton road race, or the Walton-on-Thames 24 hour endurance race. When Corbitt raced, winning was his goal—something that only a select few can realistically hope for in elite competition. The very nature of world class marathoning limits winners to those who are willing to sacrifice the most. The ability to run all out for 140 to 150 minutes, to push the body to its furthest limits and be able to crash through barriers of pain and fatigue, and then to return again to other starting lines for more of the same are not typical athletic traits. But Ted Corbitt was not your typical athlete. A distance runner's career is usually not very long. Five, maybe seven years at most. Corbitt's 20 plus years of active road racing stands as a phenomenal achievement. And the older he got, the better he became.

No one in the history of marathon racing has run more consistent quality marathons than Corbitt, nor has anyone done so much to promote the sport and organize long distance races in this country. Against the advice of his friends who said that getting involved in administrative duties would be more taxing than running ever could be, Corbitt undertook the job of forming the Road Runners Club in New York City. In 1958 he was elected

its first president. In 1970, at the age of 50, he ran in the New York City marathon, a race that he conceived and helped organize. His 5th place finish in 2:44.15 was 4½ minutes faster than he had run in his first marathon in Boston 19 years earlier.

Since 1951, Ted Corbitt has run 197 marathons and longer races — the ultras—winning 10, and finishing high up amongst the leaders in the majority of others. Yet, for all of his years of long distance running, Corbitt doesn't have any standing records to his credit. At one time he was the American record holder in three events: 25 miles, the marathon, and 50 miles.

Others have come and bested these marks. Corbitt's best marathon time of 2:26.44, set in winning the 1958 Shanahan Marathon in Philadelphia, pales in light of Gerard Nijboer's present accepted world mark of 2:09.01. Grete Waitz, the current best female marathoner, has run 2:25.41. Even Alberto Salazar, who had never attempted a marathon prior to his N.Y.C. victory in 1980, beat Corbitt's best time with an amazing 2:09.41 clocking.

Ted Corbitt's greatness in marathoning cannot be measured accurately in splits of hours, minutes, and seconds, or in the number of medals won or lost. However, it was Corbitt's amazing endurance and his ability to constantly return to the starting line month after month, season after season, and perform with the same burning intensity, that set him apart from all other marathoners in this country, perhaps even in the history of the sport. It is for this reason that Ted Corbitt will never be forgotten.

Ted Corbitt was born on a farm in

South Carolina on January 31, 1920. His father, John Henry Corbitt, was a full time cotton farmer and part time preacher, and at an early age he instilled in his eldest son, Ted, the drive to do the best in whatever he tried. These were hard times for the Corbitts, and the obstacles were many. School was two miles away, and since the school bus was for white children only, Ted would run on the dirt roads to get there, and then run back home in the afternoon. After-school hours and the summer months were spent doing farm work, helping haul in bales of cotton and preparing the 160 acres for the next planting.

During the Depression, John Henry Corbitt moved his family to Cincinnati in search of work, and it was here that Ted's running career took root. In high school he ran the 880, finishing fourth in the city championships in his senior year. At the University of Cincinnati, Corbitt became an all-around specialist, running races from the sprints and 440, up to two miles.

Following his graduation with honors in physical education, and a stint in the army during World War II, Corbitt went to New York City to begin work as a physical therapist at the International Center for the Disabled on Manhattan's Lower East Side. The little running he did in those early days was squeezed in between work at the Center and study for a master's degree in physical therapy at NYU. In 1950, with study requirements finally behind him, Corbitt began preparation to run the Boston marathon, a race that had intrigued him since high school. After seven difficult months of training every other day, Corbitt was finally able to run 30 miles non-stop. *continued on page 28*

Then with only a few weeks to go before the marathon, he began training daily, mixing his solitary workouts with 14 miles of speedwork one day and two hours of road work the next. Training ideas and theory came from what Corbitt had read about the great Olympian, Emil Zatopek of Czechoslovakia, winner of the 5,000 meter and 10,000 meter runs in London in 1948.

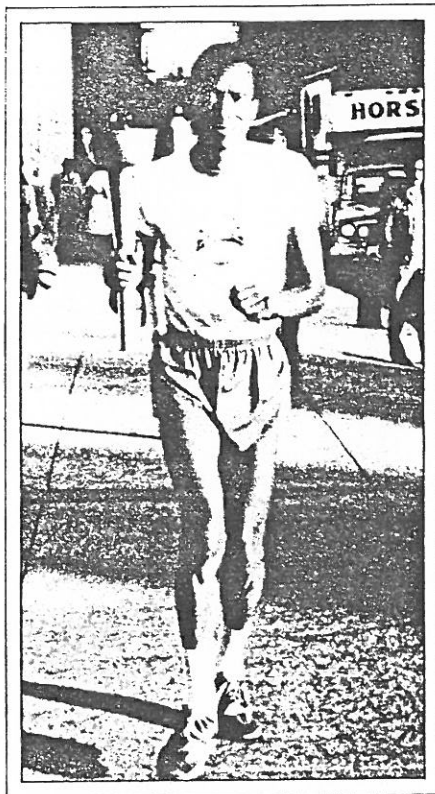
There were 150 starters on the line in Hopkinton in 1951, quite a contrast to the mob scenes of today. Ted Corbitt was just an unknown New Yorker who was making his debut in a race that attracted the best runners from around the world. Little did he know, as he stood there nervously contemplating his chances, that he would return to Boston more than 20 times to push his skinny body up and down the hills, in quest of a victory that would always elude him. He was to become, after Johnnie Kelly, a local Boston runner, the all-time favorite of the Boston crowds.

In his biography of Ted Corbitt, entitled "Corbitt," author John Chodes writes of Corbitt's "effort mask," the strained visage that Corbitt presented to runners and the public as he pounded out the miles in competition. "Ted Corbitt's features contort," wrote Chodes, "his brow wrinkles, his eyes twist, he groans. He sounds one step from death. But he isn't. It's just his way of running." Away from the running milieu Corbitt presents a stark contrast. He has the serene look of one who has been to the mountains of Nepal and there discovered the meaning of life. He has a youthful gait that belies his years, and one would never suspect that this man is incapable of running another fast marathon. His extreme slimness is exaggerated by large billowing white trousers and an almost oversized lab jacket. As he noiselessly pads about the fifth floor gym of the International Center for the Disabled, where he is now the chief of physical therapy, he beckons his patients with a bony index finger or with an almost slow motion nod of his head, sometimes calling to them in a voice so low that he gives the impression of whispering.

Daily, Corbitt is enclosed in this large room, surrounded by human suffering and frailty. It is his job to oversee the rehabilitation of people now confined to wheelchairs or dependent on walking sticks or aluminum crutches. Here, Corbitt witnesses "effort masks" of a different sort as patients struggle on leg machines or slowly shuffle their damaged legs across the floor while gripping aluminum horizontal bars. "It's emotionally wrenching," says Corbitt, a

man who has run more miles than anyone in history.

Ted Corbitt is a gracious man. But he is also very private. He is not at all at ease when it comes to talking about his past accomplishments, or feats of athletic endurance that not too many others will ever try to emulate. He once ran 100 miles non-stop on a weekend training run, while on another weekend jaunt he ran twice around the island of Manhattan: 62 miles of pavement. One July, while training for an ultra-marathon, he logged more than 1,000 miles of roadwork. That breaks down to more than



Corbitt in the 1978 Marathon.

a marathon and a quarter a day for the 31 days. These were just some of the things that Corbitt felt had to be done in order to win. Corbitt would rather think of the present and what lies ahead for him. His running is limited now. Four to five times a week he makes the 11.6 miles from his apartment in the Bronx to the ICD by running one way. He is no longer a familiar weekend sight on route 9, running up through Yonkers, Hastings-on-Hudson and Dobbs Ferry, en route to the Tappan Zee Bridge and back. There is too much work to do with the standards committee of The Athletic Congress, of which he is the chairman, to allow that. And he needs his rest.

"I hope to get fit and race a bit more," says Corbitt. "I hope to race one of these days..." His soft voice trails off and he stares down at the floor.

"I have pain sometimes in my left sacroiliac area," he admits reluctantly after being prodded by a visitor. "It refers out to my left hip. It shifts around."

Although Corbitt tries to be optimistic about his chances of racing again, he agrees that the cumulative physical affects of running hundreds of thousands of miles may have finally caught up with him.

"To really get fit for competitive purposes you have to put your body under a lot of stress. That's what training is. You have to suffer a bit. Eventually, there is a price that has to be paid for all of this."

Many times Corbitt paid right on the spot for his physical demands by suffering severe muscle pulls, mysterious stitches that came in races and almost doubled him over, and fatigue. His back condition is most likely his last and most costly payment.

Still, Corbitt runs. A year ago he was in the New York marathon and finished in 4:16. He is amazed that the world record cannot be broken on the course.

"New York is not a particularly fast course," he says matter of factly, "but the excitement of the crowd enters in and changes things considerably. The two hour marathon is going to come. It has to. Today, many of the runners are semi-professionals and they have the time to put in the 200 miles a week that are needed. They can afford to train properly. Some runner, with the help of a good coach, is going to break the world record and I think it could happen in New York in the near future."

There are fortunes to be made today by the elite runners of the world and there are a few who have benefitted nicely from the marathoning fever that hit this country. One just has to look at the runner's names plastered on running apparel and to look at those who have become virtual running billboards for Adidas, Puma, Nike, and other manufacturers of running gear. Ted Corbitt preceeded these lucrative times; he was born too early, but he holds no resentment towards these new rich men.

There is a gleam in Corbitt's dark eyes and a hint of a smile sneaks across his face as he assesses the current marathoning situation. "My only regret about all the interest in marathoning today is not in missing out on certain financial opportunities that running may be presenting. I just would have enjoyed all the extra opportunities to race that have opened up in the past few years. Yes, I would have liked to have raced a lot more than I did." •