

AN AMERICAN ORIGINAL

BY STEPHEN SULLIVAN

If there is anything approximating a living legend in our relatively young sport of road racing, it is Ted Corbitt. No one has run so many long races in such far-flung locations under such a variety of conditions as the man they call The Father of American Ultramarathoning. No one has been so visible for as many years while remaining so much in the shadows, quiet and self-effacing. Ted, now 63, still very much a supporting actor in a sport that has taken center stage, brings new dimensions to the word enigma.

Ted Corbitt's statistics are staggering: 198 marathons and ultramarathons, five 52.5-mile trips from London to Brighton, a 2:26:44 marathon best, numerous single-age world records, a 1952 Olympian, a 100 kilometer, a 100 miler, a 24-hour run, over 120,000 miles logged since 1947. Behind the numbers, however, lies the Corbitt story that cannot be as easily traced, a story of motivation. He has put his body through series after series of tormenting tests, challenged the limits of sinew and cell, marrow and bone, tissue and tendon, cardiac muscle and soul; he has pushed himself beyond the will to continue and kept going by the force of what only a man and his unconscious can understand. Words are poor indicators: "At the time (the 1950's), most conclusions regarding long distance running were drawn from thought processes rather than from experience," Ted says. "If you want to learn, you have to explore."

And so Ted, who wanted to learn, donated his body to science. There were a few occasions when he collaborated with medical personnel, notably in the '74 Boston Marathon when he ran with a portable ekg, but mostly Ted kept the results of his private little tests to himself. He taught by example. The fact that he kept coming back, marathon after ultramarathon, was enough to prove to others



Sketch by Rod MacNicholl

that the limits of human endurance were greater than previously thought.

Ted remembers, with encyclopedic detail, many of his races, conjuring up dates, sites, times, names, places, opponents, specific drinks of water during a 50 miler. Ted remembers, with fond laughter or a wry smile, the times he didn't make it. Like in the '66 Cherry Tree Marathon, when on a rainy day his body temperature dropped dangerously and he started to hallucinate with a mile and a half to go. "The atmosphere lit up," he says. "Everything was on fire." Like his first and only 24-hour run in '73 at Walton-on-Thames, when while battling a sore hamstring and a hip that grated like glass against its socket, he suddenly realized, "I can't go through this for another seven hours." He finished both races, though, and is more comfortable talking about them than the Olympic Trials marathon race that sent him to Helsinki. It wasn't enjoyment that spurred him on, nor was it masochism. It was simply "a challenge, something I wanted to do."

Ted speaks softly, with hints of a southern drawl left over from his early years in Dunbarton, South Carolina. He strikes one at first as aloof, a figure on the outskirts, but he warms quickly to a subject, especially when the subject is running. Though not demonstrative, he is proud. He knows what he has done and why he has done it. Running is a part of him, knit into his genes, and even during his present period of "active rest," he possesses a deeper sense of what it means to put one foot before the other than anyone else living.

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Ted Corbitt is a husband, a father, a working man—important aspects of his life that are often overlooked. He married Ruth Butler in 1946, shortly after his discharge from the army, and they have one son, Gary, who is 32, living in Jacksonville, Florida. He has worked for the past 34 years at the In-

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ternational Center for the Disabled (formerly Institute for the Crippled and Disabled) on East 25th Street in Manhattan, where he is now chief physical therapist.

Ted is a man of innovation and intelligence, characteristics often overshadowed by his image as a quiet machine grinding out the miles. He was a pioneer involved in the founding of the Road Runners Club of America and the RRC, New York Association, and served as the local association's first president and the third president of the national body. He gave direction to running and provided the fledgling organizations with both a form and a forum. Publications that later became the RRCA's *Footnotes* and the NYRRC's *New York Running News*, were founded by Ted.

Stepping conveniently from his leadership roles, which he never relished, Ted moved into the background in the early 60's but continued working as an "organization" man. Seeing that there was a "long or short end" to most road races, he set out to tidy up the situation, scrutinizing courses throughout the nation with a well-calibrated eye. His booklet, "Measuring Road Running Courses," published in 1964, is still the standard today. As a result of his educational efforts, and his position as Chairman of The Athletics Congress' Standards Committee, runners can be reasonably sure of the accuracy of their race courses.

He has made his mark in many areas, but the focus must inevitably return to his running, for it is out there, on the road somewhere between London and Brighton, in the thirtieth mile of a fifty-mile race, where he is most visible. Talk about Corbitt and there is no avoiding The Stories:

- His daily training runs in black crepe-soled shoes, from his apartment in the West Bronx to work and back, 22 miles in all.

- The 1958 Boston Marathon, when Ted and two other leading entrants were disqualified by a physician in the pre-race medical for irregular heart beats. The three started 100 yards behind the starters and all finished unofficially in the top ten, Ted placing sixth in 2:43:47.

- Or the famous run about Manhattan Island when, according to sources he'll not fully discredit, Ted said to his running buddy after completing the 31-mile loop, "I think I'll

take another lap."

Of such stuff legends are made.

Ted's story, still far from complete, was told by John Chodes in his 1974 biography, titled simply, "Corbitt." Ted, predictably, "tried to discourage him from doing it," and agreed to go along with the venture only after Chodes had arranged a publishing agreement with *Track & Field News*. To this day Ted is surprised by the number of people who have read the book, which painstakingly relates every triumph, setback and injury along his long road. "Many tell me they use the book to psyche themselves up," Ted smiles. "I find that amusing, but I can understand." This attitude reflects his ironic stance toward his running. It is as if he views his running self in the second person, a device useful, no doubt, in talking his body through the uncertainties of endless miles.

Running has been transmuted during Ted's time, from an activity practiced by few to a major force in the fitness boom involving millions. From Ted's perspective running started to catch on around 1964 (most place the date c. 1973), a time when President Kennedy's exhortations on fitness began showing results. The nation was into isometrics, calisthenics, and, Ted believes, the running movement grew out of this. Suddenly there were more people on the streets and roads, getting out of breath, raising their pulses and spirits. Today, the long distance runner is something other than a symbol of loneliness. Running is a small part of the nation's consciousness.

No one, certainly not Ted, foresaw this happening. "My initial reaction was disbelief," Ted admits. "I thought that it was just a fad." But unlike many "old timers" who speak crankily of the old days, before prize money replaced trophies and agents replaced handlers, Ted has few complaints about the present. He allows that "I don't like mob scenes," but as one who knows the benefits of fitness and has worked hard to promote running, he views favorably the sports' current popularity. "The good old days were not so good," he notes,

"that's why the RRC was formed."

If it's true that the sport of running has picked up and left one of its founding fathers in the dust, Ted doesn't mind. He's always been content to go his own way, at his own pace, and if he's asked, add a few well-thought-out words. His role within the sport has been in a sense ambiguous. His great feats of endurance, what he calls "personal stunts," have expressed a drive to be alone, to internalize the struggle; yet he continues to reach out to runners through publications, occasional public appearances, and his work on the Standards Committee. With the meticulous attention with which he attends his personal affairs, Ted has attempted to bring order and reason to the sport he loves.

In recent years Ted has cut back on his training and racing. He refers to himself as a "participant" rather than a competitor, he knows his fastest times are behind him but he's sure there are better times ahead. 1982 was not a good year. For the first time since 1951 he failed to run a marathon. "I haven't run much since September," he said. "I don't feel that well." Not feeling well to Ted means he isn't ready for a marathon in the morning. He still works eight hours a day, without the thought of retirement, and gets in "just a normal amount of exercise." Soon, when he's given ample rest to the chronic hip problem that is "just waiting there for me when I start up again," he will begin walking the 11 miles to work. From there, running is only a few strides away. He'll keep going as long as his legs will allow.

After so many miles and numerous encounters with the ultimate, Ted is still learning, and that, perhaps, is his most important message to runners: treat the body well, but don't be afraid to test the limits; learn from failure and success, there'll be plenty of both. With the opportunity to become nostalgic or misty-eyed, Ted remains firmly grounded. He regrets nothing and is convinced he should've achieved more. "I knew I didn't have to run as much as I did to reach the same level of performance, but you have to go through a lot to discover what the possibilities are."

Ted's life has been a devotion to such discoveries. If he had it to do over, he would; only next time, he says, "I'd make different mistakes, not the same ones, I hope."