

Ted Corbitt: American Ultrarunning Pioneer

by Trishul Chems

On July 10, 1988, I had the great privilege and joy of interviewing 68-year-old Ted Corbitt, whose distance running career is legendary, inspiring, and pioneering. In 1952, early in his marathon career, Corbitt made the U.S. Olympic team, and he ran the Olympic marathon in Helsinki. After ten years of distinguished marathoning (2:26:44 PR) Corbitt decided to try his hand at the ultradistances. He finished fourth at the 1962 London-to-Brighton, and continued to compete in ultras, setting high standards. He set an American record for 50 miles on the track (5:54 in 1966), 100 miles (13:33 in 1969; this is still the U.S. 45–49 100-mile record), and 24 hours (134.7 mi in 1973). One of his most noteworthy marks is a 5:35:03 for 50 miles (1970), which is still the U.S. 50-and-over record.

These top performances were not the result of talent alone. Corbitt trained hard, and was the American pioneer of 200- and 300-mile training weeks, which prepared him for world-class results in major competitions.

Ted Corbitt played a central role in many important developments in U.S. distance running, most notably the founding of the Road Runners Club (he was the first president) and the establishment of guidelines for the accurate measurement of courses.

Looking back at this amazing man's career, we marvel at the standards he established and respect the foundation of American long distance running he created for us.

This interview touches on only a few aspects of Corbitt's life and running career. For a more detailed account, readers should consult the biography by John Chodes: *Corbitt, The Story of Ted Corbitt, Long Distance Runner*, 154 pp., paperback, published by Track and Field News, P. O. Box 296, Los Altos, CA 94023 (415) 948-8188.

Personal Background

Ultrarunning: What sports did you do as a child?

Ted Corbitt: Mostly, I ran. There wasn't much else to do, except when friends came by, I would wrestle with them. Just playing like that. This was on a farm in South Carolina. When we moved to Cincinnati, it was mostly running games: hide and seek, short races, and baseball. In high school I trained for cross-country for one year, but didn't race because we never had a team. But I participated in track, running the half-mile with a best time of 2:10.

UR: How did you start running, and when

did you start running competitively?

TC: On the farm, I ran to the store, to the mailbox and to school. I ran just about everywhere. In Cincinnati, I walked every day, first to elementary school, then to junior high school, high school, and the University of Cincinnati. My first formal race was in seventh grade in 1933: the intramural championship 60-yard dash, which I won. Then I raced in high school, at the University of Cincinnati, and afterwards. There were not many track meets in Cincinnati or the midwest, especially when World War II was getting cranked up. That limited meets. Also the color line was drawn even in some of the meets in Cincinnati, so I could not participate in them. In the midwest, places like Illinois and Indiana, there were track meets but I was a little reluctant to take part in them because I didn't know what type of reception I would get, and what problems I'd have getting a place to stay and getting something to eat. If I had owned a car I would have taken part because eventually you could find a place to stay. In my sophomore and junior years in college I ran the half-mile (2:09), mile (under 5 minutes) and two-mile (under 11 minutes). In my senior year, I ran the quarter mile (51 seconds), mile relay, and 100-yard dash. In my best 100 (10.1) I pulled a hamstring at 70 yards, finishing third and I limped the rest of the season. In my senior year in college I ran cross-country. These were on four-mile hilly courses done in times between 23 and 32 minutes. We didn't have many races, so it was difficult to get in shape and my times were slow. This was during the war. The seasons were curtailed as was travel to some degree.

UR: Did you have any interest in long-distance running in high school or college?

TC: Yes, the idea intrigued me. In 1936 I heard of the marathon and realized for the first time that people ran that far. So I became interested in that event at that time. I wasn't really thinking of that when I started running in college, but I did start exploring longer distances and I found it hard to get used to. It took a lot of work to be able to run any real distance, but I started because I was interested to know if I could do it.

UR: Where were any individuals who helped you in your early years of marathoning or ultramarathoning?

TC: These individuals came in the form of books. When I got out of school, I went into a public library and tried to find out something about running. There wasn't much available, but I read what I could and used that as a guide. There was an article on marathon training in *The Amateur Athlete*,

which was the periodical of the governing body and it advocated three workouts a week.

UR: Which people had the greatest influence on you and your running career?

TC: Arthur Newton, through his books. One was called *Races and Training*. I don't remember the other book. And Percy Cerutti of Australia. I met him in Helsinki during the Olympic games and corresponded with him from then until he died in 1976. Percy came through New York City in 1958 and he gave a demonstration and held some training sessions with members of the New York Road Runners Club in Van Cortlandt Park in the Bronx. Dr. William Ruthrauff from Philadelphia had a great influence on me. He spent a lot of time working with me in the late 50s and early 60s. He helped me with my form. He thought I was training too hard, which I didn't believe at the time. He helped me get to some races and gave me valuable advice.

Training

UR: People often identify Ted Corbitt as being one of the first people to use very high mileage in training. Is that true?

TC: Well, if you say that I was one of the first, it is approximately true. Arthur Newton had done high mileage. By the time I became an ultramarathoner there was a handful doing 200-mile weeks.

UR: In your early years of marathoning, how many miles did you do a week?

TC: I ran six or seven days a week, totaling about 100 miles. I ran all kinds of races during my training. The only slow pace I did was on my long work-out. I ran hard — not racing speed, but not a jog. I also did some interval running. Believe it or not, I started that before I knew what the term was. I would run up a hill and then run back down taking a 70-yard recovery. This was all done on grass. In 1951, I met Fred Wilton at Prospect Park and he was surprised that I was doing this. He had written some articles on that training method but I had been doing this back in Cincinnati.

UR: Tell us about your training for your first marathon?

TC: My first marathon was in Boston (April 19, 1951: 2:48:42). I trained for a year. I decided I wanted to master 30 miles before I would attempt a marathon because I had difficulty getting past 20 miles in training. I wanted to be sure that whatever happened, I would finish. I finally did conquer 30 miles after a number of failures (if you can call a 20–22-mile workout a failure). I did it on a cold day and it was starting to snow and I realized at one point that I was sticking my tongue out to get some snow flakes and that made me think that probably I was thirsty. So after I took a good drink of water (right on the course) I felt so much better and it gave me the strength I needed to finish the workout.

UR: How often did you do 200 miles a week and for how long and when?

TC: I started this early in my marathon career but I only did it for one week. It happened on a Labor Day weekend — I would do 30 miles a day for seven consecutive days. On the weekdays I had to run after work, which made it tough. Later, I did it twice a year. In 1956, I did 200 miles a week for the months of January, February, and into March. This was in preparation for the Olympic marathon trials in 1956. In March I went to a 30-km race in New England and I didn't have any speed; one of my teammates, John Connelly, beat me. He was overweight (but improved) and he apologized. It made me feel terrible.

UR: Are you saying that the long 200-mile weeks didn't necessarily pay off?

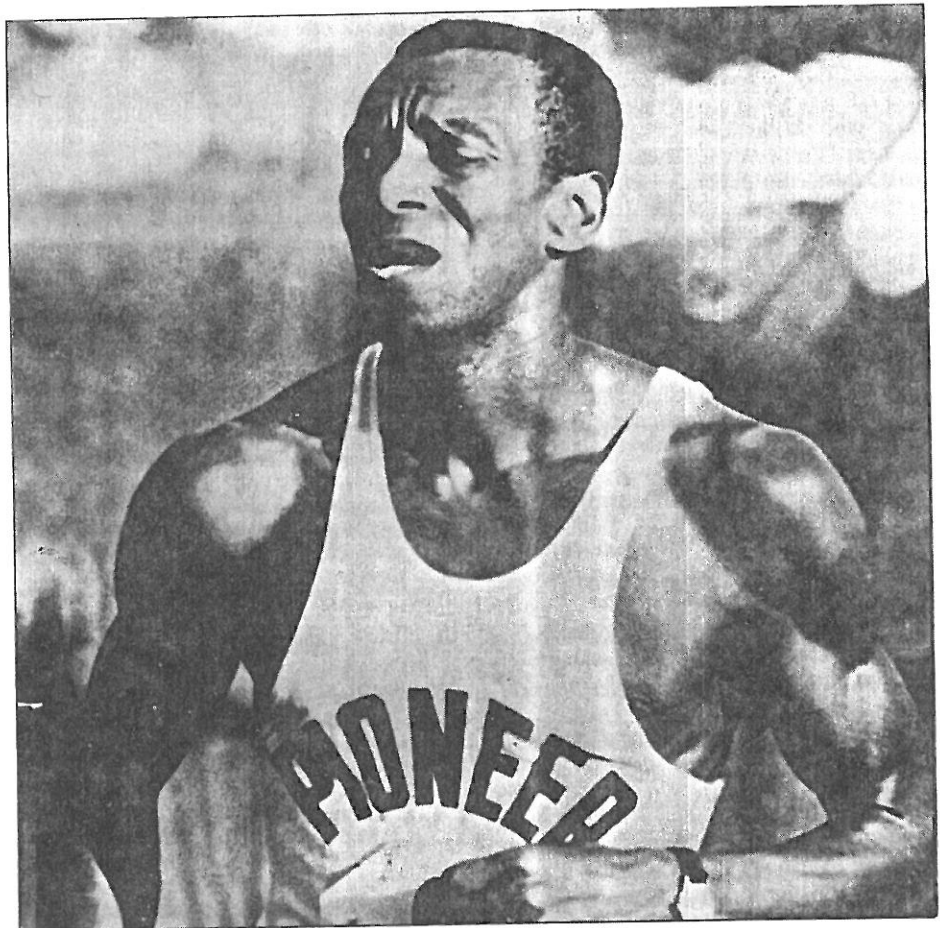
TC: They can and they did. It is just that I hadn't prepared for the marathon but that woke me up. This is one of the disadvantages of training by yourself. That is, you are not always doing what you think you are doing in terms of form and so forth and it's very easy to train too hard for too long. That's what happened to me in this March race. And coming up in April was the Boston Marathon (the first of two Olympics trials). So I started doing some speedwork every day up to the day of the race, which I finished in 2:28:06 for sixth place.

UR: So ultimately the high mileage helped you?

TC: Yes, I think there is a place for 200-mile weeks for some runners who can build up to it. I built up to it and had great success. Some runners have observed that they run faster times after a long race. One New York ultrarunner ran a six-day race and then ran PRs in all the shorter races that followed that summer. I ran faster after long workouts. So I continued to run 30-mile workouts, but I eventually cut down on the number of them. I always tried to run one before my first marathon of the season. At some point I realized I didn't need to do this anymore, but I ran one anyway, although sometimes I delayed it until the last possible day because I really didn't want to do it. By then I was running ultras and I would run to work. Sometimes I'd come up to Van Cortlandt Park and run 17 miles on the track and then run downtown to work to make a 30-mile day.

UR: Do you regret your training methods or do you think they were best for you? Would you have done anything differently?

TC: No, I learned about the body as I went along and at the time I did the high mileage it was all right. I was doing a lot of experimenting. But looking back, I realize that I had gotten good advice, though I didn't know at the time that it was good advice and I had to find it out for myself. The good advice was to rest more. I would do the long runs again, but I would make a point of breaking off. You see, the fault of long run-



Corbitt at the Balfe Cup 50 Mile in England in 1966.

ning is that if you don't come out of it in time, then you won't run as fast as you are capable of running. For example, in 1956 I was training high mileage for Boston and, not having switched over to racing speed, I ran a poor 30-km training race. I could have run all day possibly but I couldn't run any faster.

UR: Were you working full-time when you were putting in high mileage?

TC: Yes, 40 hours a week. [Ted has been a physical therapist from 1948 to the present.] The only time I took off from work was to go to the Boston Marathon. Otherwise I just took my regular vacation time for trips and races. Some Boston Marathons were on Saturdays, which was not a day off in New York. So I would have to take the day off to run it.

UR: Was all your training on paved surfaces?

TC: No. I ran some cross-country trails in Van Cortlandt Park, and on the grass in Brooklyn's Prospect Park, where I made up a half-mile loop on the meadow that I used every time I went there. There weren't many runners around and I figured it was better in terms of contact with the police to run in that area. In Highland Park in Brooklyn I also ran on the grass. I started running mostly on paved surfaces when I went to work in Manhattan. I would run through the

streets in street clothes and street shoes.

UR: Did your training include any nonrunning activities?

TC: Other than weight training — no. I did stretching, but I would consider that just part of training, to warm up. I did weight training early on, before most runners would do it. It was done as part of an experimental physical therapy program. But I was not the first runner to do this. The main reason other runners didn't train with weights was that their coaches prevented it. At that time they didn't know enough about proper training with weights.

UR: How about any other activity, like playing baseball?

TC: After I got out of high school I didn't play much more baseball. I didn't do any other activity other than walking. I used to start each cross-country season with long walks, up to 28 miles. I had always walked to and from school and when I got injured in running I'd walk to and from work and so forth.

UR: Would you do anything specific in preparation for a 50-mile race, such as extra long workouts? Shorter races?

TC: For races up to 30 miles my marathon training would suffice. My first 50-miler was the London-to-Brighton race and I'd increased the amount of running that I did.

By that time I was routinely running 100 miles or more per week. I gradually increased the amount and got up to 200-mile weeks. But this was probably the first time I did a 300-mile week. Manhattan Island is just over 31 miles around the edge and I started this on the Labor Day long weekend by running twice around each day. I had decided that if I couldn't do this, then I wouldn't go to England. On the second lap I started getting pains at old muscle injury sites, but I got to a certain point and the pain went away. On the third day the pain in my knee persisted so I stopped with ten miles to go — it was very hilly coming up the West Side and I decided I was satisfied. So most of the mileage was done in the first three days. I did this 300-mile training week at Labor Day every year after that whether I went to London or not.

UR: Are you still practicing as a physical therapist?

TC: Yes I still work full-time. I became a physical therapist in 1948 after finishing a course at New York University.

UR: If you were coaching an upcoming ultrarunner what general guidelines would you suggest.

TC: Ideally, I'd like to get the runner early, in junior high or high school. First I'd have him become a good cyclist and possibly a good swimmer for general development. Then I'd have him compete in track in college and do the long-distance running afterwards. Then I'd put him on a weight training program to get him really strong; he'd learn how to stretch properly and just progressively move up. I'd make him as good a track runner as possible from the mile on up and then have him take on a marathon, but then take him up by degrees. The ultradistances can be taken on without too much specialization beyond the marathon.

UR: Do you still run?

TC: I haven't run in the past year. I've been walking — just regular walking. One of my ambitions was to walk 100 miles in less than 24 hours — I still haven't gotten around to that. In 1974 I ran the National 50-mile championship in Central Park. I didn't really want to run it but I went down anyway. I finished in fourth place but then a week later, at a cross-country race, I was coughing my head off. Less than a week after that I had a breathing crisis; I went to the doctor the next day and he told me I had bronchial asthma and he said there was no cure and gave me a prescription to get filled. I decided to forego the drugs and went on a three-day fast instead. Before the fast I wasn't able to lie flat in bed at night, but after the fast I could and I've been pretty much able to do that ever since.

Racing

UR: What memories of your racing career stand out?

TC: My most disappointing race — and it's

a great memory — is a 24-hour run. I had hoped to do about 155 miles which I still think was a reasonable expectation. I'd had some trouble training that summer: I had pain in one of my quadriceps so I'd stop and stretch and the pain would go away; then I'd run another hour and repeat it. After a time this didn't work and this accursed pain in my quadriceps was killing me. After 17 hours I realized that I wasn't going to achieve my goal, but I didn't drop out. I ran and walked to finish the race. That's a negative memory.

During the first 50-mile championship on Staten Island in July, 1956, there was a heat wave. On the day of the race the heat had melted the glue in my running shoes so that the sole came loose. I noticed this just as I was packing my bag before I left the house. So I got my old pair of shoes made of leather, but unfortunately they blistered my feet. My goal was to do the first marathon in 2:42 to disarm my major opponent. When the blisters started to develop I slowed down. We still passed the marathon in 2:49 but it slowed me down. They said that if the temperature passed 85° they would stop the race. I don't know what it reached but they didn't stop the race. I got severe dehydration cramps. The second time they stopped me the muscles in my feet contracted so strongly that I just stood there. It was the first time I had ever stopped or walked in a race. Anyway I resigned myself to second place in 6:12 or something like that.

UR: Any favorite ultras?

TC: The greatest ultra I ever saw was the 100-mile in Flushing Meadows Park where Don Ritchie ran 11:50. That was easily the best one I've seen. I've been in three world record races but I rate the Don Ritchie race superior. One of the best ultras I've heard about is the Comrades Marathon in South Africa, which is on a tough course.

UR: Bronchial asthma ended your career.

Do you know why this happened and whether it could have been avoided?

TC: I'm not sure why this happened. First I thought it was due to air pollutants and I'm still not sure that that isn't the case. I told this to the doctor who was helping me and he said it was internal pollution — not enough sleep, and so on. I was burning up over 6,000 calories per day. Up until last year I thought I was the only member of my family to have had bronchial asthma but I discovered that an aunt also had it. I was 54 years old when I first got it. So I guess I'm lucky I didn't get it any earlier.

Certification

UR: You were one of the proponents of accurate and certified courses. Was it difficult to convince people of the importance of accurate courses?

TC: It sure was. This was part of the NYRR thing. I was the first president and we patterned the club after the Road Runners Club of England. They had a standards

and certificates program: three races on certified courses or tracks, at different distances, and you would get a certificate. That's how I found out how to measure courses accurately and I became chairman of the AAU's Standards committee, which had the job of certifying national championship courses. The calibrated bicycle method came from England. The cyclists there used it, so we started using it, although the IAAF had recommended the measuring wheel. The booklet I put together on course measurement and certification was distributed in a few countries around the world and we got the course certification thing going with the help of the Standards Committees, *Runner's World* magazine, and the running boom. It all helped to stimulate interest in measuring.

UR: How do you feel about the state of course certification and the certification process today?

TC: We started to decentralize the course certification process in 1981 and it took about four years to complete. There's a new booklet out now and the measuring procedures have been refined and improved and it's still evolving.

UR: Do you think there's any hope of getting any more accuracy into the 100-km courses in Continental Europe, which have been notorious for being short?

TC: It's possible, certainly for those on roads. But for trail courses like the Western States . . . well, it would take a lot of work with a highly skilled team. In Europe they don't have the need to do it accurately.

Race relations

UR: Judging from incidents all around the country, in colleges, in suburbia, and in working-class neighborhoods, Black-White relations seem to be stagnating at a low point right now. What are your feelings about the current state of race relations in the country?

TC: As I mentioned previously, after I got out of college and in my senior year of college at the University of Cincinnati, traveling and finding a place to stay were problems. There were two colleges that wouldn't permit the University of Cincinnati to bring black track men with them to meets. I read about today's problems and see it as part of evolution. There's no reason why this should go smoothly. Part of it is economics and fear. And I tie this in with South Africa too. South Africa and the United States have similar patterns in that sense. For example, in 1931, the National AAU Track & Field Championships were scheduled for New Orleans and they weren't going to let the black track and field athletes compete in that championship. So the championship was moved to Lincoln, Nebraska. And these were the black athletes that won medals for the United States at the Olympics the following year.

UR: Did you encounter discrimination in

your running endeavors? How did it affect you?

TC: The only problem I can think of off-hand was the junior national 10,000 meter championship in upstate Ohio in 1943. I believe they recommended two hotels. I went to one hotel and I'm not even going to describe what happened. So I ended up in the gym — I was the only one who stayed there. The hotel experience was overwhelming.

Miscellaneous

UR: What do you think of the current state of ultramarathoning in the United States?

TC: As far as I'm concerned it's healthy. It's almost strictly amateur in the old sense. The fact that there is a magazine with pages of races . . . it's absolutely mind boggling to me. After World War II you had only three or four marathons in the United States that you could count on each year.

UR: Were you surprised by the resurgence of multi-day running? Would you have liked to have tried a six-day or longer stage race?

TC: I didn't envision it happening because there was little interest in ultras in general. I thought there would be a lot of runners who felt like we did, namely that we'd finish a marathon with something left and so we wanted to try longer distances. But we didn't get the participation in 50-mile races that they got for 100-km races in Europe. So when multi-day running came in I didn't expect it to be the attention-getter it was.

I would have liked to run a six-day or longer race. I'd planned to run solo across the country and received permission to take time off work but bronchial asthma put an end to that plan.

I see a future for multi-day racing because there are people that are interested. It's not necessary to have large fields. The British RRC last year put on a race for attempts to set world records and they had a very limited field. You can have a race with two people in it — that's all you need — you don't have to have a large field to be successful.

UR: What about Yiannis Kouros? Do you think he is exceptionally talented, or is it just that so few top athletes have tried races of 100 or more miles? Have you watched Kouros run? Is there something we can learn from his training or racing or approach to the sport?

TC: Look at the whole history of 100-mile races. Some good runners, even Olympic marathoners, have tried their hand at it. It's not in the way he trains or his background as far as I know that can account for what he's done. He's just an exceptional talent that happened to come on the scene. We can speculate on how many there are out there but Kouros is just an exception. And, as you know, he can do a lot better. He reminds me of that Russian weightlifter who broke the world record 100 times. Why break a record ten times when you can chip a little away each time and make 100 world records?

UR: Is the sport more or less popular than you would have predicted 20 years ago?

TC: More popular, except that I thought ultramarathoning here would attract enormous fields for the 100-km races, as happens in Europe. That hasn't happened. It's expected that there'll be more leisure time in the future — perhaps instead of 40-hour work weeks, two people will share and work 20 hour weeks or something like that. The human body, in order to function well has to be used in all ways, including the physical, and I think a lot of people with more leisure time will choose running.

UR: Do you think that it's important to the average runner that the times at the top of the U.S. lists haven't improved much over the last five years?

TC: It will still have an effect on the average runner even though he has no chance of matching that. It's not important that the times keep improving in a straight line. There are no runners like Barney Klecker and Alan Kirik on the scene at the moment but there will come others who'll see these

times and go for them and get world records, which will have an effect on the average runners by making them raise their own horizons.

UR: Do you think sponsorship money will ever come to the top ultrarunners?

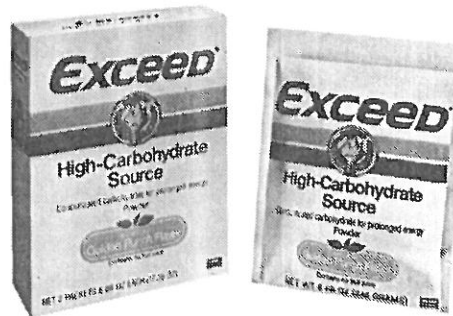
TC: There will be some money. Mostly the sport will remain strictly amateur in this country and elsewhere but there will be some prize money. If the runners have patience and keep doing it, prize money will come, though it may take a generation or more. This concept of prize money is acceptable in all sports so it will come to ultrarunning.

UR: Do you see any hope of getting an ultra into the Olympics within the next 50 years (not counting the 50-km racewalk)?

TC: Ultramarathoning will spread and once that happens the Olympic Committee will get pressure to include an ultra. Ultras are part of the running scene, and there's no reason why people can't get together and lobby for its inclusion in the Olympics.

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