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NEW YORK CITY MARATHON

ROBERT LIPSYTE

One Runner Who Has Logged His Miles

Ted Corbitt will walk the New York City Marathon on Sunday, his fifth official walk over a course he helped lay out and measure. His target time is 5 hours 30 minutes, which is faster than many people run the marathon, but then Corbitt, who is 74 and has run 198 marathons and ultra-marathons, has come to regard 26.2 miles as a middle-distance event.

Twenty years ago, for example, while preparing for a 24-hour race in England, he decided to run 100 miles around his neighborhood in upper Manhattan. He told only his late wife, Ruth, and only because she would worry if he didn't come home to sleep. He started out at 9 A.M., and except for "toilet stops" and "the last time I had ice cream" he didn't stop running until the following morning at 7 A.M. He was never more than five miles from his apartment, and he was only worried that drunks might harass him when the bars closed. It was a typically uneventful and painful 101.5-mile run in which he thought about "opponents," felt the addictive rise of endorphins and self-esteem and considered new techniques of measuring road race courses, which he considers his legacy.

"Long-distance runners," Ted Corbitt said at lunch this week at a diner in the Bronx, "have to be very strange people." In answer to a question asked with raised eyebrows, he added: "Yes, yes, me, too."

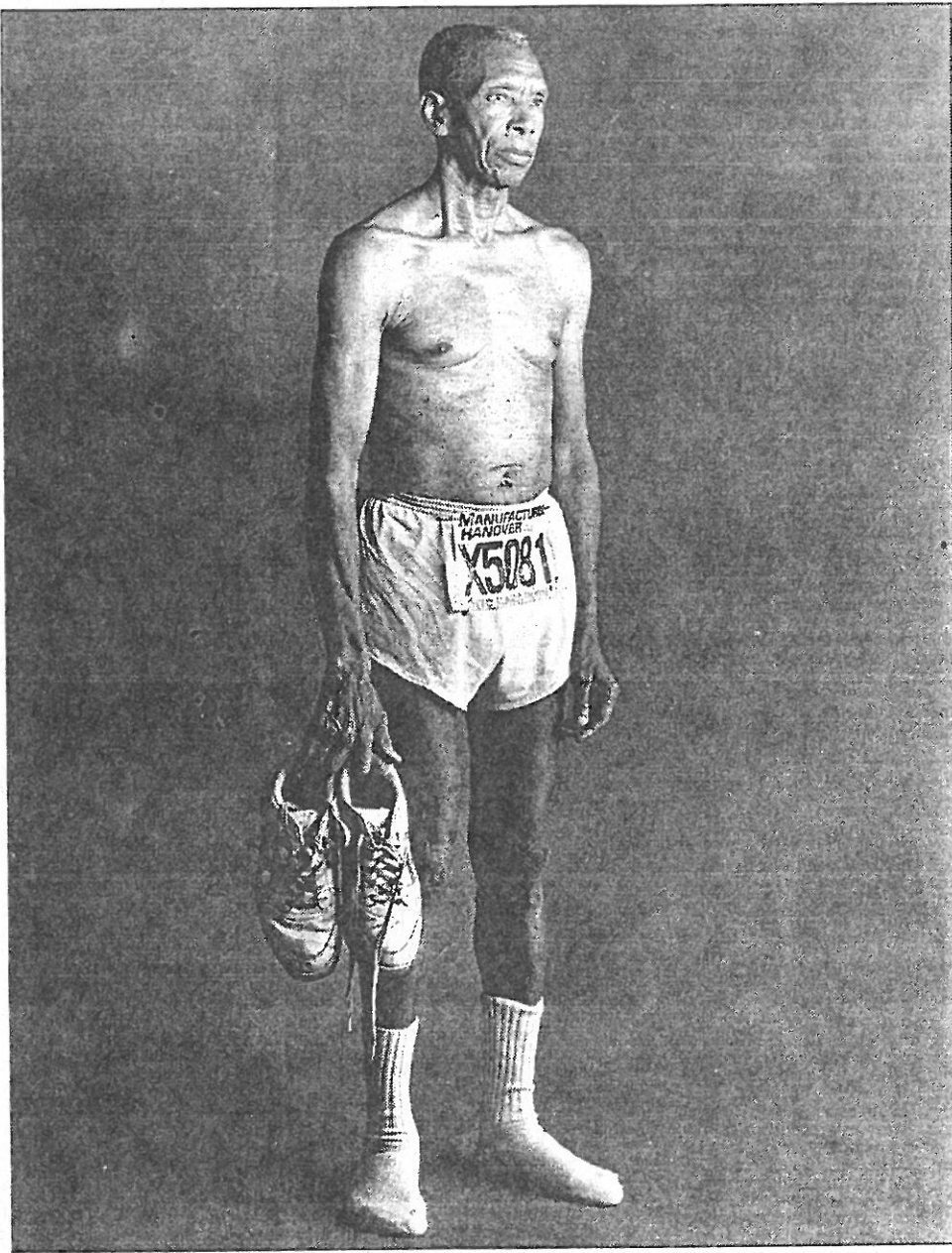
He is a small, shy man, who speaks very slowly and softly, which is also how he eats, small bites chewed into liquid without sound. He smiles frequently at private thoughts. An aura of calm surrounds him. He is generous with his immense knowledge of training programs, nutrition, self-massage, but he has never coached or allowed himself to become a guru, even during the quasi-religious fitness frenzy of the 70's. He never had the showman's flare of Fred Lebow or Dr. George Sheehan or Jim Fixx. He never made money from the boom, or became celebrated outside the runner's world. He just ran and ran and ran.

"Running was an extension of my life," he said, silently juicing a green salad. "As a kid I ran on the farm, I ran two miles to school. In New York, I used to run to work, 20 or 30 miles every morning, depending on how I felt, from Marble Hill up to Yonkers down to the International Center for the Disabled, that's what they call it now, on First Avenue and 24th Street. I retired last August. The last 20 years I walked to work."

Corbitt was born in South Carolina and mostly raised in Knoxville and Cincinnati. He ran track in high school and at the University of Cincinnati where "the color line was in place and there were many track meets I couldn't get into."

But nothing could stop him from just going out on the road and running, alone, for as long as his "fragile" body could be commanded by his "tough" mind. He was inspired by Ellison (Tarzan) Brown, the Narragansett Indian who won the Boston Marathon and competed in the 1936 Olympics.

After World War II — Corbitt was on a troop ship headed for a Pacific invasion when atomic bombs were dropped on Japan — he earned a graduate degree in physical therapy at New York University and began running for the predominantly black New York Pioneer Club, one of the few nondiscriminatory clubs. He



Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times

Ted Corbitt, 74, has overcome a "fragile" body with a "tough" mind in 198 marathons and ultramarathons.

his first marathon (Boston, 2:48:42, 15th place) and his seventh in 1952 (Helsinki Olympics, 2:51:09, 44th).

Corbitt was already thinking beyond the marathon. He had trained for his first marathon by often running 30 miles at a time, and he once ran the marathon distance every day for a month. Although he says now that 30 kilometers (18.6 miles) is his favorite distance ("It's over before you suffer"), he found in the ultramarathon, 50 miles, 100 miles, a true "spiritual test."

"You have to really want to do it," he whispered while chewing a cheese and broccoli omelet. "You don't have to win or beat someone, you just have to get through the thing. That's the sense of victory. The sense of self-worth. But I regard those ultra-marathons as stunts. They were only important to me. I just wanted to see what I could do."

In 1974, Corbitt began coughing and breathing with difficulty. Bronchial asthma was diagnosed. More reflective now, especially in conversations with his 42-year-old son, Gary ("My friend, my biggest fan"), Corbitt has come to believe that the asthma was caused by "a stressful life" as chief physical therapist with a heavy caseload, as a 30-or-more-hours-a-week runner and as a busy nonpaid official with the Amateur Athletic Union and the Road Runners Club.

"Sometimes I think I developed asthma so that I would stop; I was burned out," he said. "But I had to taper off, start walking the distance, because it had been like an addiction. I was afraid of quitting cold turkey. In retrospect, I believe my greatest health sin was not sleeping enough. If I could have gotten more sleep I would have lasted longer as a runner. But there was so much to do."

Corbitt will be 75 next Jan. and he is planning a typically private celebration — he will cover 100 miles at a trot, a combination jog and walk. He hopes that birthday stunt will exercise his most disappointing memory, a 24-hour race in 1973 when his right quadriceps began aching after 17 hours. He was in second place at the time, his target of 154 miles in sight, when he gasped for his handler, "I can't go another seven hours."

He was advised to quit the race before he hurt himself, but he compromised. He would "stop fighting" and merely try to survive until the finish. He ran 134.7 miles.

"Sometimes," he whispered, eyes downcast into his calf's liver, "if you have a brain in your head, you should drop out."

"Have you done that?" The eyes rolled up and Corbitt smiled. "Not yet."