

Grandpa Ted

ONE OF MY very best moments at the New York City Marathon came at the starting line. There I met Ted Corbitt, lining up almost unnoticed at the back where he could see all that he'd helped create.

If Fred Lebow is the father of the New York City Marathon, then Ted Corbitt is one of its grandfathers. And this is only one among many of Corbitt's proud descendents.

New York's 25th-anniversary book credits him for helping take the race citywide. But Corbitt insists that his suggestion was misunderstood.

"By 1975," writes Peter Gambaccini, "Ted Corbitt had decided it was time to give this marathon a fresh boost. He envisioned a competition of some sort between runners who each would represent one of New York's five boroughs... and mentioned his notion to his friend and fellow runner George Spitz. Legend now has it that Spitz mistakenly thought Corbitt was talking about a race that would actually be run THROUGH the five boroughs."

Pioneers seldom receive much of the later glory, but that's okay with soft-voiced Corbitt. He never sought attention for himself.

He never acted as a standard-bearer for American black long-distance runners, of whom there still are few. He never directed a big race, never wrote a book (though one came out ABOUT him), never gave a major speech.

Corbitt let his contributions speak for him. They reach far beyond his own running, in which he was a 1952 Olympic marathoner and U.S. record-holder at several ultradistances.

In 1958, Ted was one of 10 founders of the Road Runners Club of America that would give the sport a framework when it exploded more than a decade later. He served as the first president of the New York Road Runners, which would grow into the world's biggest club, and edited the publication that would become New York Running News. He set up this country's first course-certification program and watched it become the world's best.

John Chodes asked me to introduce his book, Corbitt (published in 1974 by Tafnews Press). "Among us runners," I wrote then, "Ted Corbitt is admired and envied not because he has run so well, but because he has run so well for so long. Corbitt is amazing to us because he has lasted."

He was 54 then and had run for almost 40 of those years. Little did we know that Ted's running was ending that same year. A severe case of asthma stopped him abruptly.

Corbitt had said, "Fitness can't be stored. It must be earned over and over, indefinitely." So he became a long-distance walker.

Now he says, "Sometimes I think I developed the asthma so that I would stop. I was burned out. But I had to taper off, start walking the distance because it had been like an addiction. I was afraid of quitting cold-turkey."

At almost 75 (he'll reach that birthday on January 31st), he remains quite active. Robert Lipsyte, writing in the New York Times, calls Ted "the last surviving spiritual elder of the

modern running clan."

Lipsyte adds, "He never allowed himself to become a guru. 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."

Corbitt now walks and walks and walks. In the New York City Marathon, yes, but also in the annual 100-mile race named for him.

Ted has revised downward his goal of living 100 years. Now he wants to celebrate the new century, which will arrive as he turns 80.

His way of getting there is as it has always been: "Keep moving. Do something useful." Few lifetimes have been filled with more movement or more useful work.

Our Friend Oprah

SCOFF IF you want. Joke about the most-reported slow marathon in history. Accuse me of celebrity-chasing, in the style of People magazine.

I see the Oprah Marathon as great news for running. She drew attention to the sport from an audience that doesn't usually notice.

I'm usually no fan of Oprah Winfrey's. I have nothing against her personally but don't care for the arena in which she works. She hosts one of the umpteen talk shows that supply canned conversations to viewers starved for their own.

Oprah may be a big talker. But no one can talk her way through a marathon.

She's one of the most recognized figures in America. (The supermarket tabloids have kept watch as her own figure has slimmed by dozens of pounds.) But celebrity isn't worth a single mile in a marathon.

Oprah turned talk into action. She put in the miles. She earned our applause for what she did and how she did it.

Understand first that this was no publicity stunt. And that she didn't run the marathon on a whim.

If Oprah had wanted maximum exposure, she would have gone to the New York City Marathon. Her publicists would have beaten every media bush in that town.

Yet she talked only of running a marathon this fall, without saying where it would be. She popped in unannounced at the Marine Corps race in Washington, DC.

This effort was a long time in the making. Eight years earlier, when her rollercoaster weight stood at one of its highs, Oprah had promised herself that she would be in shape to run a marathon by her 40th birthday.

She would turn 40 this fall. With that deadline in mind, she started marathon training a generous five months before Marine Corps.

Oprah seemed to make a rookie mistake. Instead of following the usual advice of running her first marathon "just to finish," she set a time goal.

As rookies often do, she just doubled her half-marathon time and made that her goal. In 1993 she'd run a 2:14 half in San Diego, so she aimed for a 4-1/2-hour marathon.

Oprah's post-marathon comments in the news brought nods of recognition from anyone who has run one. She said, "As I saw the 26-mile sign, I started to cry because I thought, 'Oh God, it's over. It's over!'"

Those last two-tenths of a mile seemed to take forever. "Where is it?" she wondered. "Where is the finish?"

She finally ran under the clock in 4:29:20. One of her first statements: "This is better than winning an Emmy."

She then uttered that standard finish-line oath: "This is my last marathon." But she left the way open for an encore by saying that she would stick with half-marathons.

Say what you will about Oprah's effort. She did more to introduce our sport to the talk-show-watching, tabloid-reading masses than all the running writers combined.

Oprah's fans see her as a friend who comes into their living rooms each afternoon. She gave the marathon a face and a life that most of them had never seen before.

She inspired more of these people than all the Olympic gold medalists in history ever could. She may lead some of them away from their TVs and onto the roads.

By running a marathon and putting such a positive spin on it, Oprah becomes our friend too. We need more runner celebrities like her. Now how could we talk Rush Limbaugh into trying this?

Dying Trying

THE DIRECTOR of a marathon, set to debut next year, called to voice his dismay with the coverage that the New York City Marathon received his hometown. "The paper here didn't say anything about the race itself," he told me. "It only reported that two people had died," he said.

He later got a discouraging but not unexpected phone call. Someone asked him if their city should be getting involved in something as dangerous as a marathon.

Besides the two deaths at New York (along with a similar non-fatal incident), one runner died at the Detroit Free Press Marathon. All were men, and all were apparent heart attack victims.

The news deals with exceptions. These tragic cases were so widely reported because they are so isolated.

In New York's 25-year history, only three runners have died. More than 100,000 times that many have survived, and untold numbers of them have overcome heart-disease risk factors through running.

Detroit News writer Tom Henderson notes that Sam Grafton, a 42-year-old veteran marathoner who collapsed at 22 miles, was the first runner to die at the Free Press Marathon. "I figured it out," writes Henderson. "One death in 17 years works out to one death in about 204,000 person-hours of running—hardly proof of the dangers of exercise."

Henderson's appraisal of the Detroit case also addresses the safety concerns raised by the heavier-publicized New York fatalities. He began by recalling the day in 1984 when Jim