

TED & JACKIE: Separated at Birth?

by John Hanc

IT'S TIME TO PLAY
"Name That Sports Legend."

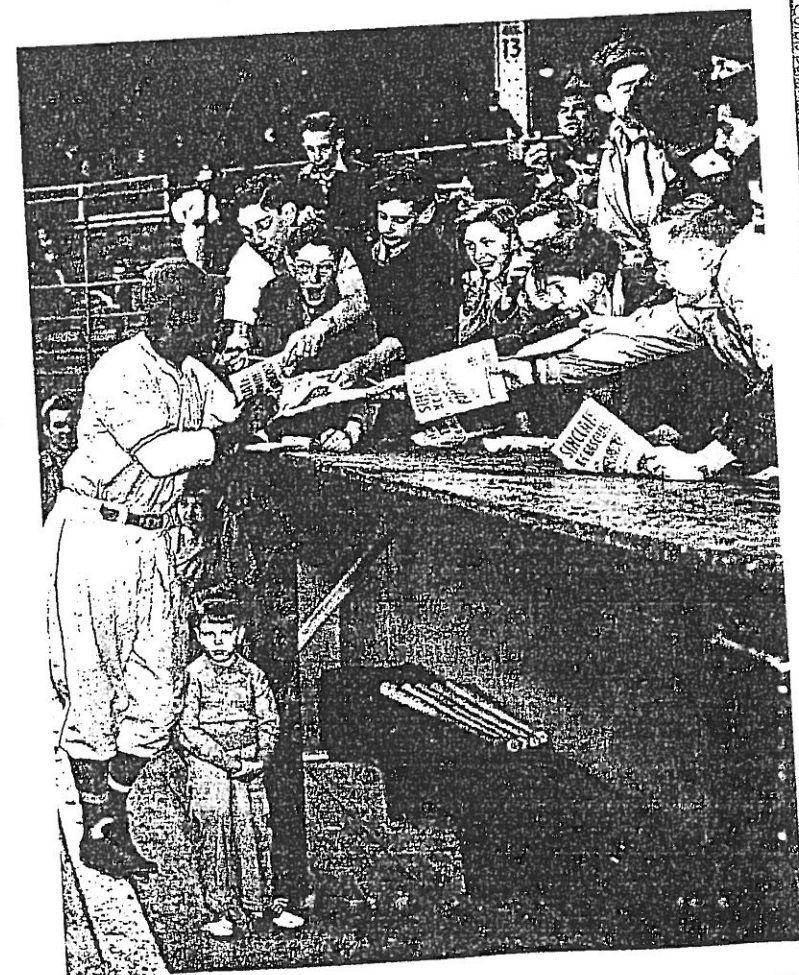
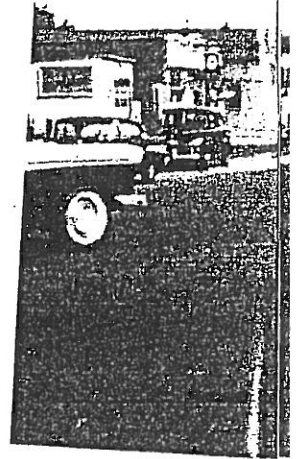
Can you identify this outstanding athlete? He was born in a rural Southern town on January 31, 1919—a time when the Civil War was still a living memory, and segregation was the law. He transcended the prejudices of his day, attending college and serving his country during World War II. He helped break the color barrier in his sport. He was a champion, a pioneer, and a role model for other African-Americans.



NYRRC Archive



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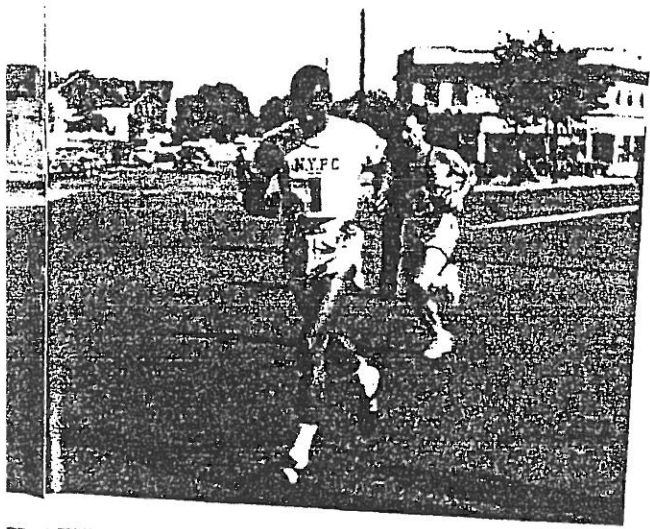
Corbis/Bettmann

Okay, we admit it. There are actually two correct answers to this question, based on those clues. The one that most people would give is Jackie Robinson, the late, great Brooklyn Dodger who has been much celebrated this year; April 15 marked the 50th anniversary of his becoming the first African-American to play in Major League Baseball.

But there's another athlete whose life history bears an uncanny resemblance to Robinson's. And not the least of many coincidences is the fact that this man also transformed his sport. His name is Ted Corbitt. He was the first president of the New York Road Runners Club and founding editor of *NEW YORK RUNNING NEWS*, and is often described as "the father of long distance running."

The similarities between Corbitt and Robinson are striking. They were born on the same exact day, just a few hundred miles apart—Robinson in Cairo, Georgia, and Corbitt in Dunbarton, South Carolina. They were both named after Theodore Roosevelt (Robinson's middle name was Roosevelt). Although born in the Deep South, both men grew up in other parts

Just five days prior to breaking the color barrier in Major League Baseball, Jackie Robinson, then a member of the Montreal farm team of the Brooklyn Dodgers, signs autographs before playing in an exhibition game at Ebbets Field.



NYRRRC Archive



Clockwise from above: Ted Corbitt leads the Queens Marathon in 1957; Jackie Robinson high jumps through the air as a member of the UCLA track and field team; Corbitt makes his way toward a 53-minute 10-mile finish at a mid-1950s race in Connecticut.

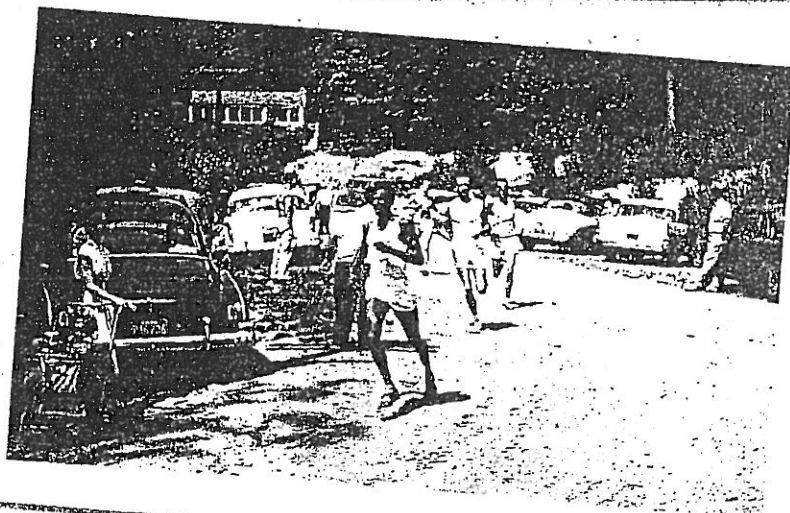
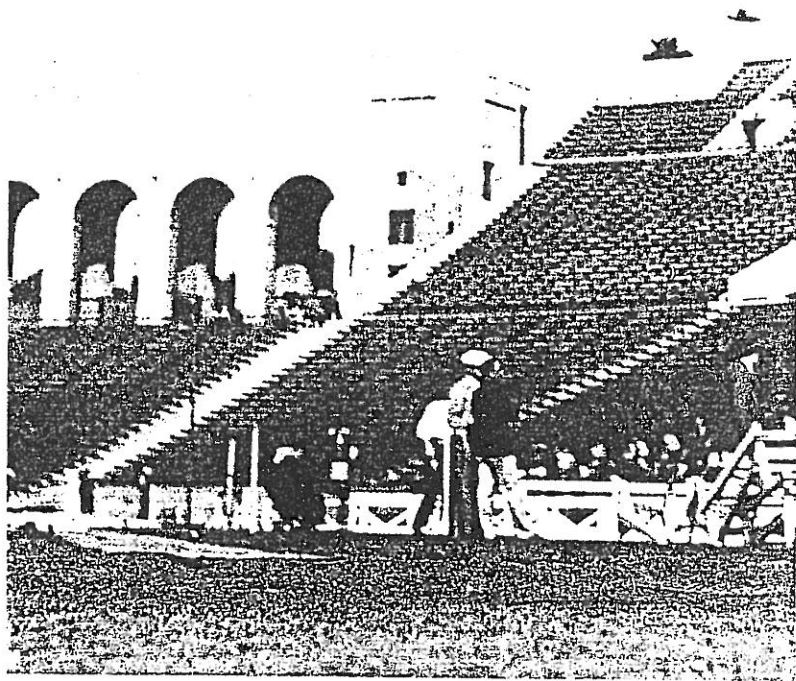
of the country—Robinson in California, and Corbitt in Cincinnati, Ohio—before settling in New York. Both men registered as Republicans. Both received college educations, which was uncommon for African-Americans of that era. Both served during World War II: While Robinson, an officer, was being court-martialed for a courageous act of defiance, Corbitt was being trained for the invasion of Japan. In August 1945, he was on a troopship in the Caroline Islands when the A-bomb ended the war.

"I feel like I've been living on borrowed time ever since," admits Corbitt, now 78 years old and living in Manhattan. "I probably would have been killed in that invasion."

Corbitt never met Robinson (although his late wife Ruth did once, at a fund-raiser in the 1960s). But he knew of him, even before Robinson's major league breakthrough in 1947. "I knew him primarily as a football player and track runner," says Corbitt. "There were better [baseball] players in the Negro Leagues. I'd seen many of them play. But he certainly had a great impact."

While Robinson endured and then flourished in the big leagues, Corbitt was training to become a physical therapist (there were no endorsement deals or trust funds for track athletes in those days). At night and on weekends, he ran, despite being barred from many meets because he was black. He ran, despite a "horrible" performance in the 1952 Olympic Marathon in

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1900s Kodakman

competitors finished the race, and the field will undoubtedly grow again—just as it has every year since the first annual marathon in 1994.

The toughest part about participating in the Carib Cement International Marathon? After it was over, we had to return to freezing New York City!

For information about next year's race, scheduled for February 8, write to: Carib Cement International Marathon Secretariat, Carib Cement Company, Ltd., P.O. Box 448, Rockfort, Kingston, Jamaica, or call (809) 928-6231-5 or (809) 928-7530-1, or fax (809) 928-6096.

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Helsinki. He ran, despite being stopped more than 200 times by the police, who weren't used to seeing an African-American athlete running through the streets of New York City. Like Robinson, Corbitt turned the other cheek. "They were just doing their jobs," he says.

Corbitt ran and ran. He set national records at distances of 25, 40, and 50 miles, competed in the Pan Am Games, became only the second man in history to run 100 marathons, and may have been the first African-American to win a marathon (in Philadelphia in 1954). Three times he finished second in the prestigious 52-mile London-to-Brighton race, so impressing the British running community that, to this day, the first American finisher in the event—which is the unofficial world championship of ultramarathoning—is awarded the Ted Corbitt Trophy.

In 1958, Corbitt assisted in

organizing a group of weekend running buddies into the NYRRC. Aside from serving as the Club's president and starting up its newsletter, Corbitt helped organize the first national standards committee for the measurement of race courses. In the process, one of the most democratic sports movements in American history was created.

"Ted helped to refute the narrow-minded theory that blacks could only run short distances," says Rich Innamorato of the Broadway Ultra Society. "He earned people's respect, and changed their thinking. It's a shame that many runners today don't even know who he is."

Part of the reason for that is Corbitt himself. He's a quiet, dignified, self-effacing sort. But Innamorato is right. Runners—especially members of the NYRRC—*should* know Corbitt, and they should hear what he has to say about the changes that have occurred in America over his lifetime. "Some people say there hasn't been any change," says Corbitt, whose grandparents were slaves. "But they're either blind or ignorant. This is a different world altogether."

And, most would agree, a better world with the legacies of people like Robinson and Corbitt. These two men followed similar paths through life and seem destined to be linked even longer, thanks to one last, eerie coincidence: In 1972, Jackie Robinson's funeral was held on October 27, which was also the birthday of Corbitt's late wife Ruth. When Ruth died in 1989, she was buried in Cypress Hills Cemetery in Brooklyn. Ted will eventually join her there, when the time comes, in a family plot not far from the grave of . . . Jackie Robinson.

Here are some of the services that the New York Road Runners Club has developed for you:



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If you are interested in receiving more information on our safety programs please call Belinda Saunders at the NYRRC (212) 423-2219