

# Ted Corbitt: A True Running Pioneer

By Don Allison

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A Hall of Fame for long-distance running? Not a bad idea! In Utica, New York on Saturday, the first five individuals were inducted into this new Hall of Fame. Bill Rodgers and Frank Shorter? Goes without saying. Joan Samuelson? Of course; she defined women's marathon running. Katherine Switzer? Certainly a good choice; she made history as the first official women's finisher in the Boston Marathon and has done a magnificent job of promoting women's running. Ted Corbitt? Ted who?

Well, I'm here to say that Ted Corbitt is as deserving an inductee as any of the other four honorees. Although he may not be a household name, much of what is taken for granted in long distance running today might not have been possible without the effort and vision of Ted Corbitt. On many levels—as an organizer, a course certifier, and an athlete—Corbitt laid the groundwork for the incredible growth that the sport experienced in the 1970s and again during this decade.

All of this would easily been enough to earn a spot in the hall, but incredibly, all that Corbitt accomplished was done as a black man in a white man's sport during America's racially turbulent decades of the 1950s and 60s. If all that were not enough, Corbitt bridged two separate facets of the sport, marathon and ultramarathon running.

A quiet man by nature, Corbitt lets his accomplishments do the talking, and they speak volumes. He earned a berth on the 1952 Olympic Marathon team held in Helsinki, Finland and finished in the top ten in the Boston Marathon. In ultrarunning, Corbitt set standards that took others decades to match, including times of 13:33 for 100 miles and 5:35 for 50 miles after the age of 50. These performances were not the result of an abundance of natural talent. Corbitt was also a pioneer in high-mileage running, racking up 200-mile weeks and more at a time when even running 26.2 miles was considered bizarre behavior.

Corbitt got started running at a young age, competing in track meets while in high school and college. It was there however, that he first ran into the color barrier. Not only was he prohibited from taking part in some meets in the Midwest, but also was not able to participate because he simply could not find a place to eat or a hotel that allow him to stay because of his color. Despite this adversity, Ted ran meets where he could and clocked very decent times of 51 seconds for the quarter-miles, 2:09 for the half, and even 10.1 for 100 yards.

In an interview a few years ago with Tishul Cherns of UltraRunning magazine, he said "I first heard of the marathon in 1936 and realized for the first time that people ran that far. I started running longer distances and it was hard to get used to it, but I did because I was interested to know if I could do it."

In his early years of marathon running, he ran about 100 miles per week. In his first marathon he finished the 1951 Boston in 2:58:42. Not content with the results, he subsequently upped his

mileage to 200 per week. The mileage managed to reduce his time at Boston to 2:28:06, good for sixth place. Asked if he regretted punishing his body with high-mileage weeks, Corbitt said, "No. I learned about the body as I went along and at the time it was all right. I was doing a lot of experimenting." All of this training was done while he was working a full-time job as a physical therapist. He often ran the 30 miles from his home to work—each way!

With all of this success with long distances, Corbitt naturally thought of ultras and set his sights on the 55-mile London to Brighton race. For that race, he even logged a 300-mile week. Talk about a time-intensive hobby! Corbitt went on to set American records at 50 and 100 miles and 24 hours, in which he totaled nearly 140 miles. He raced the London to Brighton several times, finishing as high as second. Unfortunately, a bout with bronchial asthma in 1974 led the end of Ted Corbitt's stellar running career. The ailment has continued to plague Corbitt, but he still manages to walk regularly for exercise.

Few know that Corbitt was the first president of the New York Road Runners club. In addition to the NYRRC on course to what is now the biggest running organization in the world, he adopted the practice first used in England of wheel-measuring running courses for accuracy. For the thousand of races that have been accurately measured according to the USATF meticulous standards, you can thank Ted Corbitt.

When the Road Runners Club of America was just getting started in the USA, guess who they looked to as its initial president? That's right—Ted Corbitt. Not bad for a guy who was just looking to be allowed to enter a few track meets as a teenager.

As we reach the end of the century, the work, leadership, and accomplishments of some of the original pioneers in running can easily fade from memory. In the ultimate "What have you done for me lately" sport, yesterday's giants become merely footnotes inside of a dust-collecting record book. To truly appreciate how far the sport has progressed and how good we have it today, with thousands of wonderfully organized events open for all to participate in, learning more about those who laid the foundation for this abundance can offer great insight and perspective.

For that alone, the idea of a distance running Hall of Fame is a good idea. If more of today's runners become aware of and appreciate Ted Corbitt's place in running history, the hall will have been a success. So to one of the all-time greats, we say congratulations Ted. A more deserving individual could not possibly have been chosen.

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FROM: MEASUREMENT NEWS  
September 1998  
Issue #91