

Excerpted from *First Marathons*, by Gail Kislevitz

A WILLINGNESS TO SUFFER

Ted Corbitt

Residence: New York, New York

Occupation: Retired Physical therapist; Distance Runner

First Marathon: 1951 Boston Marathon

D.O.B.: 1-31-19

Age at first marathon: 32

Often called "the pioneer of ultramarathoning," Ted Corbitt not only helped to break the color barrier in his sport, but has also set national records at twenty-five, forty, fifty, and one-hundred-miles, and in the twenty-four-hour run. Running was a scientific endeavor for Ted. Fascinated to find out just how far the body could run and endure, he kept pushing himself beyond the limits of the times, using his own body as a human laboratory. Born in Dunbarton, South Carolina, Ted spent his early childhood picking cotton and doing other chores after school on his father's farm. However, during harvesttime, children didn't even go to school, as they were needed to get the job done and school was canceled. He first learned about running as he ran and walked to and from school. His grandfather, a former slave, used to run everywhere. He was also a good jumper, but there are few remaining details of his life. The Corbitt family lived by the motto: Be the best in whatever you attempt. Soft spoken and reserved, at seventy-eight years of age Ted still goes out for a bit of a run. He still lives in upper Manhattan, on the island that he used to loop around for training. It is rumored he has never smoked and only tasted beer once in his life. Every athlete should know the story of Ted Corbitt; he helped pave the way for the sport that has captured the hearts and souls of millions.

Back when I was running races, no one ever made any money. Heck, it cost us money. And time, and pain. Most of the road races in those days were in New England, and I was always asking for a ride as I didn't own a car. It wasn't until 1958, when the New York Road Runners Club was formed, that the level of local competition improved. Then the running boom took off in the late seventies and early eighties, but ironically, my personal boom was just about over by then.

There was very little knowledge in the area of professional training available to runners, so most of my early training was experimental. I tested theories and techniques on myself. If they worked, I'd pass them on to my friends. If they didn't, well, then it was back to the drawing board. And I didn't just want to run, I wanted to run as far and as fast as I could, as was humanly possible. Many times I was accused of running too much. However, I always believed that if I had the proper amount of rest and didn't get injured I could survive just about any distance. Yes, some people have better bodies for running, but the key is to rest. In order to cash in on all the training, get the rest. If you can't run as fast as you want to, you haven't rested enough. You'll become dull.

I started competitive running during my high school years in Cincinnati. I guess I was good, because as a senior in 1938, I received an invitation to join the prestigious Cincinnati Gym Club. The letter was obviously based on my records alone, not by any club member who had attended my meets, because the club was restricted to whites only. That was only one of many color hurdles I had to cross to be accepted in my sport.

The first time I heard the word marathon I was a sophomore in high school and saw a picture of Ellison "Tarzan" Brown, who had won the 1936 and 1939 Boston Marathons. He was a dark-skinned Indian and at first, I thought he was another black runner. The idea of a long-distance race intrigued me, as at that time a four-mile race was considered long distance.

During college, segregation kept me out of many interstate meets and even some American Athletic Union (A.A.U.) competitions. Arthur Newton, a Rhodesian who pioneered ultramarathoning in the

twenties, said blacks would never run distance; they just don't have what it takes to do the distance. At the time, I was running a revolutionary two hundred miles a week. I am a fan of Newton's running and learned a lot from what he did. I would use his books to get myself psyched. His comments about black runners are unfortunate, but he was a man of his times.

Graduating college with honors, my plans to become a physical therapist were put on hold when the Japanese dropped their bombs on Pearl Harbor. Eventually, I was on a troop ship in the Pacific, with rumors flying that we were headed for Okinawa. We did land there, but that night America dropped the bomb on Hiroshima, virtually ending the war. I spent six months on Okinawa and then was transferred to Guam for another six months. During this time, I was desperate to stay in shape and even considered running through the jungles. But with occasional rifle fire as U.S. Marines hunted down unsundering Japanese soldiers who didn't believe the war was over, I decided against it. Instead, I built a gym inside my compound.

Upon arriving home, the first thing I did was get myself to New York to find my Cincinnati sweetheart and get married. Between a new wife, working, and getting my master's degree at night from New York University, my running wasn't as consistent as I liked, so I joined a running club founded by a black mortician called the New York Pioneer Club. The name was based on the fact that members were accepted without regard to race or qualifications of any kind. It was totally unique and for that reason it attracted many elite runners who wanted to be part of a club that stood for sound principles.

I was working full time as a physical therapist and never took time off to train. Instead, I incorporated my training into my day, running twelve miles one way to work from my home in upper Manhattan to the Institute for the Crippled and Disabled. Sometimes I'd lengthen the route to twenty miles one way, depending on my schedule. I don't remember ever being late for work.

The only downside to this was constantly being stopped by the police. There wasn't much I could do about it, and anyway, I didn't look like a runner as there were no specific running clothes back then. Sometimes I'd run in chinos, a work shirt, and brown shoes. Actually, I preferred to run in my street shoes, as I have a chronically sprained ankle and the support from the street shoes was better than a pair of running shoes. No one was out there running like I was. One of the most memorable times I was stopped was back in Cleveland in 1949, where I was working at a hospital. I went outside to take a break, wearing my sweats, and a woman called the cops thinking I was an escapee from the mental ward. I was approached by two policeman with guns drawn, pointed right at me.

Another time I was doing a training run over a new Yonkers Marathon course for the final Olympic Marathon trial race in 1952, and as I ran through the town of Hastings, New York, I was confused at an intersection as to which way to go. I had passed a parked police car with two officers in it, which suddenly pulled up next to me. They asked what I was doing so I explained, but again I was dressed in chinos and street shoes. They told me they were looking for someone who had stolen a car. I responded, "Well, as you can see, I'm not driving, I'm running." I did feel as if they were just doing their job. It was a part of the culture I grew up in and we don't get a choice as to the times we live in. I don't have any lingering anger and I didn't choose to be an advocate. I just wanted to run.

When I joined the New York Pioneer Club, the thought of a marathon was still in the recesses of my mind. In 1947 I competed in the 25K Junior National Championships and finished. I had a tough time, but I did it. In 1950 I finished my master's degree and made the decision to train for the 1951 Boston Marathon. My philosophy was to train to run thirty miles, so I knew I would be able to run twenty-six. But for some reason I couldn't get past twenty miles. It was very frustrating.

Then I had my breakthrough, which I remember as clearly as if it happened yesterday. It was a snowy February day and I set out to try for thirty again. I started to get thirsty and stuck out my tongue to catch some snowflakes. I did this all through the run and that day broke through to thirty miles. It was those snowflakes, the water that did it. I never drank water before on my runs and now realized that I was

terribly dehydrated. From that day on I always made sure I was properly hydrated. The other factor that was inhibiting me was the heavy, stiff pants I was wearing. After a few miles they would rub the skin off my legs.

April finally arrived and I felt ready, having run several thirty-mile runs. I shared a room with another runner I met on the train. Back then you could get a cheap room. I had no time in mind, no expectations for my first marathon. I just wanted to get through it. That year the race was dominated by the Japanese marathon team. It was exciting for me to be there, to meet some of the runners I'd read about. But mostly I just concentrated on finishing.

I stayed with the pack for the first ten miles. After that we strung out single file. I didn't know the course, so I just kept following the runner in front of me. I'd heard about the Newton hills, but I had done hill training, so I wasn't particularly worried about them. At about twenty miles, there was a gap between me and the runner in front and behind me. We were really spread out and the only way I could gauge where they were in relationship to me was to listen to the clapping of the crowds. I knew the person behind me was about thirty seconds back because that's how long it took the crowds to start clapping again after I'd pass. I knew when he started to gain because the clapping started to come faster and faster.

By twenty-three miles I wanted to quit. I was so tired. Although I had trained hard and ran thirty miles several times, I was running faster than I ever did in training. Distance wasn't my nemesis; it was the speed. I didn't run recklessly, but I ran fast. There were no mile markers then, so I had no idea where the finish line was. It wasn't till I rounded the bend onto Exeter Street that I saw the finish line. I finished in fifteenth place, in 2:48:42, and was very relieved.

I was glad it was over, but I immediately started to think how I could beat my time. I was also thinking of the 1952 Olympic Trials, which started the very next month at the Yonkers Marathon. I was thankful that I finished my first marathon. It's not a simple thing to do. You have to incur a certain amount of risk if you want to go fast, if you want to win.

British runners call distance running "having a go at it." They have a wonderful spirit about them. I always considered ultramarathoning a disease and the British had it with fever to spare.

I was once asked to represent the United States at the 52.5-mile London-to-Brighton road race. This was a great honor for me, especially after Arthur Newton's statement, and also being denied entry to the 1958 Boston Marathon due to a heart problem the doctors thought I had. I ran anyway as a bandit and finished in an ineligible sixth place with a time of 2:43:47. I went back to Boston over twenty times in my career. I guess my heart was strong after all.

Preparing for the London run was critical. On weekends, I would go out for thirty to fifty miles, or loop around Manhattan Island twice. I'd leave my lunch and some juices in my mailbox and take a bite as I passed by. I knew I'd never come back out if I went up to the apartment for lunch. One Sunday, when I passed by for a bite, my lunch was gone! I never found out who took it.

By July of 1962, half the airfare to London had been raised by sponsors and I knew there was no going back on my commitment to run from the Parliament Building in London to the beaches at Brighton. One month prior to the race I attempted a massive workout schedule that opened with Hell Week, 198 miles in the summer heat and finished with back-to-back 50s. The next day, I did a seventeen-mile run commute to work. I hated these extreme workouts. I kept sane by counting miles, beating myself up and thinking of Arthur Newton's racist comments.

There were no other Americans in the race, and I received a warm welcome in London. As I stood at the starting line with seventy other men, listening to the chimes of Big Ben, I thought to myself, "What am I doing here? I should have stayed home." The course was dogged with hills, and soon I was dog tired. At twenty miles, my so-called "effort mask" appeared. This is the part of the race when my features would

contort, my brow become wrinkled, my eyes twist, and I groan. It sounds and looks like I am one step from death, but I'm not. It's just the way I run. Actually, it scares some of my opponents which I guess is a good thing. At forty-five miles, the biggest hill of all awaited my wrecked thighs and dead legs, but somehow I kept going. Descending into Brighton, I thought I would buckle under if I ran any harder. Just then, my handler caught up with me and said, "Show me what an American can do. My five-year-old sister can run faster than you." For the first time all day, I laughed. I was grateful to have finished the race and in a decent time, and to set an American record. The first newcomer to the race who doesn't finish in the first three places gets a newcomer trophy. So for my fourth place victory, I received the trophy and newcomer record.

Afterward, we all soaked in a hot tub, trying to erase the pain from our run-ravaged bodies. Fourth place didn't seem worth all the effort I put into the event. The next day, my legs felt crippled. I didn't think I'd ever run again. Two days later, I had to crawl a quarter mile. However, an amazing transformation was taking place as I recuperated. I was suddenly filled with enthusiasm. I vowed to return to London and beat Brighton in 1964. That's another story.

I flew to Zurich the night of the race and then took a train to Germany for a physical therapy course. That late-night flight was more difficult than anticipated. When I got off the plane the next morning, I felt like a very old man. The course work was in advanced massage. I had always been interested in massage work and felt it was a necessity for recovery. To this day, I give myself a pre-warm-up massage before any running is done. However, with all my training in massage therapy, I never did get a massage after a race. One day, after a particularly long walk I decided to get a massage, but couldn't find a place that looked legitimate!

I went on to run London-to-Brighton a total of five times, and at the end of each one, I would say, "Never again."

In 1968, I received an invitation to the hundred-mile run at Walton-on-Thames, England, scheduled for October 1969. I pulled out all the stops for this one, running every marathon possible and enduring unheard-of training mileage when not racing. In July alone I ran a thousand miles, two hundred short of my goal. At the 1969 Boston Marathon, now fifty years old, I was becoming the guru of marathoning, right up there with the other legends, Clarence DeMar and Johnny Kelley. I was surprised the spectators, who called out my name, even knew who I was.

My final training plan was to run my fifth Brighton-To-London race, and then three weeks later tackle the hundred-miler. Along the way, I went for a complete checkup by Dr. David Costill, a physiologist and former track coach. After tests taken on pulse rates, leg spring, oxygen absorption, heat tolerance, and heart findings, the data indirectly confirmed that more than physical well-being, it was motivation and competitive drive that made the difference in a winning performance.

Approaching the midnight start of the hundred-miler, another runner summed up my feelings exactly: "I've looked forward to this race for two years, and now I don't want to do it." My only goal was to break the existing American record of 16:07:43. The most crushing period of the race was between seventy and eighty miles. Fatigue was overpowering and strength was definitely on the decline. There is a fear that either the legs or the mind will snap, permanently. How I wanted to quit at sixty-eight miles. I couldn't believe there were still thirty-two miles left. At ninety-seven miles, I was wobbling uncontrollably. The crowds cried out, "Don't stop now. Keep going." I could barely hear them.

Finally, I heard the bell announcing my last lap to complete one hundred miles. Later on, I wrote in my journal: "Reaching ninety-nine miles gives one a good feeling but hearing the bell . . . try it sometime." Among the many refreshments offered, such as beer and sandwiches, what I really needed was a new pair of legs.

Most runners would have retired at this point, but I knew there was more in me. As president of the New York Road Runners Club, I pushed for a masters category for runners over the age of forty, knowing that it would bring out the retired racers who couldn't compete successfully any longer in the younger arena. There was resistance from the A.A.U., which feared that a four-mile race would harm the over-forty crowd. We all proved them wrong and I won my first masters-division marathon in 1970 with a new record of 2:52:32.

When I was fifty-four, I received another surprise invitation in the mail, this one to run a 24-hour run in November of 1973 at Walton-on Thames, the same track site as the 1969 hundred-miler. Without bothering to think, I sent back my reply: "Yes, count me in." Sixteen competitors started the race. My trainer for the event was John Chodes, an adviser from the Pioneer Club days. Replacing nourishment was a critical factor in the run. John developed a concoction consisting of two hard-boiled eggs mashed in a cup of orange juice, which could be swallowed easily. Intermittent treats of chocolate bars, orange and pineapple slices, blackberry juice, and a can of sardines rounded out the gourmet menu. I kept my sanity by counting laps, using visual imagery to improve my posture, and working on arm movements. Willpower alone kept me going. John had a special technique for alleviating stiffness, by stroking my legs with a hard hairbrush to release neural energy. It worked. At twelve hours, halfway, I had covered eighty-one miles and was in second place. Events at the race changed dramatically after the halfway mark. Once competitors, we now all shared our food, reserve, and encouragement with each other. The realization that we were all in this hell together turned us from foe to friend. By mile 100, I was physically exhausted and didn't think I could continue. It was humiliating to feel so impotent after all the training I put into this. I came off the course and instructed John to perform a type of massage called "Pae-Roe," a judo revival technique using thumbs to bore down into the middle of the skull.

With seven hours to go, I said to Chodes, "I can't go through this another seven hours." I was referring not to dropping out, but slowing down due to severe quadriceps pain. I knew I could no longer perform at the level I needed to reach my personal distance goal. Then, as if we hadn't suffered enough, at the twentieth hour a sudden downpour flooded the track. We continued on, chilled to the bone, in two inches of water. It seemed as if I was only half alive. By the end of twenty-four hours, I had covered 134.6 miles, a third place victory. It almost killed me.

I've never really retired. In 1994, I was invited to the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Walton-on-Thames hundred-miler, but decided to walk it. A reporter asked to follow me with a cameraman for an interview. I agreed, but when the interview was finished she wasn't happy with it so I had to walk a few extra miles so she could get her story. I completed seventy-odd miles then had to quit due to an inflamed anterior tibia muscle. I had never dropped out of a race before.

What is the mind-set, the secret, to running a hundred miles? When Roger Bannister broke the four-minute barrier, setting a world record, he wasn't the most talented runner of his time. However, as soon as he broke it, others followed, breaking his record. There have been some experiments done on rats that prove once one rat has been taught something, other rats soon learn the procedure at an easier rate. There is a related force in the universe that is at the center of this theory, but I am not the person to explain it in depth.

The marathon demands patience and a willingness to stay with it. You must be willing to suffer and keep on suffering. On a good day, the running seems to flow effortlessly. On a bad day, it's the pain that flows. I truly believe that if you can run a marathon, you can continue for another twenty-five miles. Of course, you must be in shape and have put in the training, and endure the suffering. I would do it all over again, but I would do it smarter, having learned from my mistakes. Of course, I'd make new mistakes along the way. I have led a full life and was blessed with a wife who was a great help and support to me. I am a widower now, but she really helped make my career. She was very tolerant.

I guess I've run over two-hundred-thousand miles. I've lived through many changes, but the biggest observation I'd make is women's running. I thought that would be a fluke, that they would quit. I give them credit.

I used to have a fantasy about winning the Boston Marathon that I've never shared with anyone but my son. Here goes: I was going to train hard enough to stay out front the entire race, refusing to let anyone pass me. I'd speed up and rather die than let someone pass by. In this fantasy, to make sure that no one was gaining on me, I wore a pair of specialty glasses with side-view mirrors to see who was behind me. I ran Boston twenty-one times but never won, so I guess my fantasy can still be put to use!

I regretted not acting on the Boston fantasy. However, I came up with another one for the double marathon London-to-Brighton race, which I attempted to do in 1968. I was on a crash training program in June, July, and August, attempting to do three hundred miles a week. I didn't reach that target but I was only two and a half weeks away from concluding the heavy training, leaving the month of September to do active resting in preparation for the race. An encounter with a dog left me unable to run at all and I canceled the trip to England. The heavy training had left my body fragile, like a boxer with a glass jaw. But here's where the fantasy comes in. In this "burnout run" in London, I would have taken the lead in the first five miles and stayed there, passing the first marathon marker in 2:31 to 2:33. No special eyeglass mirrors this time, I imagined a handler on a bicycle, and he would keep me informed of what was happening behind me.

I was able to resume training after the dog encounter in time to compete in the National Championship fifty-miler that year, 1968. I am prouder of that than any other race. At the age of forty-nine, I became the oldest man ever to win a national long-distance title.

Intellectually, I'd like to run another marathon, but I'd have to get fit first. My Boston record of twenty-one entries all with a finish under three hours was recently broken. Actually, I was more shocked that people knew of my accomplishment than that it had been broken.

I look back at when I was running in the thirties and forties, when most people weren't interested in it. Now I read that we are going through another fitness craze. I am flabbergasted by such things. Running is something you just do. You don't need a goal, you don't need a race, you don't need the hype of a so-called fitness craze. All you need is a cheap pair of shoes and some time. The rest will follow.