


# Ted Corbitt at 80: still a humble pioneer

**UW News**

Ultramarathon World

By David Blaikie  
Ultramarathon World ©

 **Hakensack, New Jersey (UW)** - Ted Corbitt celebrated his 80th birthday this past weekend by competing in yet another long distance race -- an eight-hour run organized by the Broadway Ultra Society in his honor. It was called the Ted Corbitt 80th Birthday (indoor) 8-Hour Run and he wore Bib No. 80. The event took place on a 200-metre track at Fairleigh University, and Corbitt quietly enjoyed every minute of it. In all, there were 52 starters, 11 of them women. ([Results](#))

"That was a big surprise to me," says Corbitt, who has witnessed more changes in distance running over the years than almost anyone alive. He has always encouraged women to run. One of the few races he goes out to watch each year -- as a spectator -- is the women's 10Km Mini Marathon in Central Park. It pleases him to see women compete in such numbers at shorter distances and he takes it as another positive sign that their numbers are increasing in ultrarunning as well.

## Ted Corbitt at Walton, England - 1966



Running was uncommon, even among men, when Corbitt took his first competitive steps half a century ago. Yet, in an era when Jackie Robinson was breaking the color barrier in baseball, Corbitt was doing the same thing -- without fanfare -- in the small tight world of marathon, and later ultramarathon, running.

Born on January 31, 1919, near Dunbarton, South Carolina, a place that no longer exists because it was levelled long ago to make way for an atomic energy facility, Corbitt grew up at a time when white children took the bus to school and "Negroes" walked, or ran, as he often did along the dusty rural roads. Later, his family moved to Tennessee, then Ohio, where he competed in track and field events and graduated with honours from high school.

## Ruth Butler

After that, he served in the Pacific during the final years of the Second World War, then returned home and married Ruth Butler, a high school sweetheart who by then had moved to Brooklyn. They were married in December 1946 and Ted settled in New York where, where at the ripe old age of 30, he finally became a serious runner. Through the 1950s he was a serious marathoner, competing in races wherever he could find them.

Influenced by Emil Zatopek, the great Czech Olympian, and driven by an inner will to test his

physical limits, Corbitt did two things that were rare for distance runners at the time -- he ran high mileage and he did speed work. There weren't many marathon races in North America at the time -- Boston, Yonkers, Philadelphia and the National Championships -- but Ted sought them out and excelled as a competitor.

In fact, he made the 1952 U.S. Olympic team and ran in Helsinki. The race was a disappointment but better days lay ahead. In 1954, Corbitt won his first marathon (clocking 2:36:06 at Philadelphia); in 1958 he ran his career best time of 2:26:44, and by the end of the 1950s he graduated to ultras.

John Chodes, in his biography of Corbitt, published by Tafnews Press in 1974, noted that Corbitt won a New York Road Runners Club 30-miler in the Bronx in 3:04:13 in 1959. And many more ultras followed, including the famed London to Brighton Race in England, which Corbitt ran several times in the 1960s.

## **Pioneer Athletic Club**

Most races he ran as a member of the Pioneer Athletic Club in New York, which he joined in 1947 because it accepted black members. Corbitt wore the Pioneer racing singlet with pride in scores of races, including the Walton-on-Thames 50-miler on October 15, 1966. The photo that graces the cover of Chodes' book, showing Corbitt straining toward the finish line, was taken that day.

In that race, Corbitt set an American 50-mile record of 5:54:15 (placing fifth overall) and afterward John Jewell of the Road Runners Club introduced him to Edgar Lloyd, who was then an old man but who had been a great ultrarunner in his day, having run a world record 6:13:58 time for 50 miles at Stamford Bridge, England, on May 12, 1913. Lloyd was impressed by more than Corbitt's fine run that day. Gesturing at the world "Pioneer" on Corbitt's singlet, and obviously thinking about Corbitt being black as well as talented, he said: "Yes, you are."

Corbitt took it as a compliment but did not make too much of the moment. In recalling it now, he points out that there were other black pioneers in ultrarunning who made their mark long before he did. One was Fred Hitchborn, a famed athlete from the pedestrian era (known as Frank Hart), who set records and won large prizes in endurance races of the late 1800s. Another was Phil Granville, who lived in Hamilton, Ontario, and was among the top competitors in the Bunion Derbies and other professional races of the late 1920s and early 1930s. "They were real pioneers," Corbitt said in an interview.

## **Arthur Newton**

When asked about personal heroes, apart from athletes like Hitchborn and Granville, Corbitt cites the late Arthur Newton, considered by many the best endurance athlete in the world during the 1920s and 1930s. The very white and very British Newton, who spent periods of his life in Rhodesia and South Africa, and thought blacks were inferior endurance athletes, seems an odd choice for a hero to a man like Corbitt.

"He said some things in his books," Corbitt agrees. "On the surface (what he wrote) may have looked okay, because almost no blacks were doing the things he was doing then. But you're victim of your times. . . . I admired his style. He showed what could be done." (Newton later *saw* what could be done by blacks when he raced across the continent against Granville and competed against him on foot and on snowshoes in multi-day endurance events staged by the Seagram

company in the early 1930s in Quebec.)

Corbitt never met Newton during his visits, years later, to England but he did meet Pete Gavuzzi, who ran professionally with Newton in Canada and the United States in the late 1920s and early 1930s and whose individual and team achievements still cause modern-day athletes to marvel.

## **199 marathons an ultras**

Corbitt has run 199 marathons and ultras in his long career. His best race ever, he says, was the U.S. 50-mile championships of 1968. On that day -- November 28 -- he ran 5:39:43 at Poughkeepsie, New York, and won the national title. His most disappointing race was a 24-hour event, at Walton, England, in 1973. He was hoping to run 155 miles but had been sick before the race and was able to cover "only" 134.7 miles.

Corbitt ran marathons and ultras until 1974, when he developed bronchial asthma. "I stopped running for about six months and never really got fit again after that," he says. Since then, he has been a walker most of the time, often entering and completing marathons and ultras but no longer counting them in his life totals. "You either run or you don't," he says. "Walking is not running."

A physical therapist at the International Centre for the Disabled in Manhattan for 43 1/2 years (1948-1993), Corbitt still likes to get out to races. Nowadays he picks mostly fixed-time events (six hours, 12 hours or 24 hours) where there is no pressure to complete a given distance at a pace that compares with other runners. An exception is the New York City Marathon where he can walk the entire course and still have the company of other "runners" around him. This past year he covered the 26 miles, 385 yards in six hours and 55 minutes. Last year his time was 6:24 and on two occasions as a walker he has broken six hours.

## **80 is not old**

Asked if he feels 80 years old, he chuckles and says no. His father was 82, when he died of a stroke in 1974, and his mother was 103 when she died on Feb. 7, 1998. "I have relatives on both sides of the family who lived to be 100," he adds. So he hopes he has many productive years still ahead of him.

He doubts he will ever run again but he does want to continue walking and exercising on a regular basis. He also wants to write "a couple of booklets." One of them is the history of the New York Road Runners Club. Corbitt was the first NYRRC president when the club was founded in 1958. The other is a history of the AAU Standards Committee. Asked whether he will ever write his own biography or memoirs, he pauses to consider the question, then answers: "Probably not."

What he will continue to live simply and enthusiastically. One group he likes is the Sri Chinmoy Marathon Team and he often goes out to see the races they stage. "I like what they do," he says. "I consider myself an ultramarathoner more than a marathoner, and they have been very friendly to ultrarunners. I'd admire them."

The birthday race in his honour started at midnight and ended at 8 a.m. Corbitt walked just over a marathon -- covering 26 miles, 1046 yards, or 214 laps. Afterward a number of the participants went out to breakfast and Corbitt joined them. Everyone had a good time. "Yes, it was very nice," he says.