



Photo Run Photo/Victa

Sam Gadless, honored for being the only male to finish the '98 NYC in the 90-and-over category.

'Age is just numbers,' said last year's oldest NYC Marathon finisher, Sam Gadless. At 92, he'll be out there again Sunday — with 460 others older than 65.

# WHO'S COUNTING?

By John Hanc

**S**OME WOULD SAY that running a marathon is the last thing you'd want to do at any age, much less an age when many folks would prefer having both feet planted firmly on the patio of their retirement condos. But for 86-year-old David Schilowitz of Flushing, running 26.2 miles through the streets of New York beats shuffleboard in Boca Raton any day.

On Sunday, he'll compete in his fifth consecutive New York City Marathon. He's a man who isn't awed by the challenge — after all, he's a relative newcomer, having taken up running only six years ago. "It's a wonderful thing," he says. "It keeps you fit, keeps you occupied."

A growing body of medical evidence is showing that Schilowitz has the right idea: Research has shown that seniors who are active are less at risk for many common ailments of aging, from osteoporosis to depression. Of course, being active is one thing. Running 26.2 miles is quite another. And yet, despite the grueling nature of the marathon, Schilowitz is not going to be alone in his long-distance efforts.

The number of 65-and-over competitors in the New York City Marathon has almost doubled since 1990. A total of 461 individuals in that category — 404 men, 57 women — are expected to take their places, alongside 30,000 others, at the starting line on the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge early Sunday. They range from relative youngsters, like 67-year-old Ira Brotman from North Babylon, to the man who has practically trademarked the title of "Oldest Competitor" in this race, Sam Gadless. A retired tai-

lor who lives in Boca Raton, Gadless turns 93 at the end of this month. He racewalks the course — and this will be his fourth straight year. (Last year he went the distance in 8 hours, 26 minutes.)

Others will run, and run well. The top finisher in last year's 65-to-69-year-old age group, Huntington's Donald Schildhaus, 65, ran 3:16:13, a time many 35-year-olds would covet; it's a time that put Schildhaus ahead of about 28,000 other finishers.

Why are so many seniors eschewing the easy chair for the hard, rigorous training that a marathon demands?

Some would cite the example of other active retired figures, such as John Glenn, who zoomed into outer space at age 77 last year, or former President George Bush, who celebrated his 75th birthday by skydiving. All good role models, of course, but there are others, perhaps less heralded pioneers in senior fitness:

Ted Corbitt is one. When Corbitt, now 80, finished the debut New York City Marathon in 1970, he was considered long in the tooth for a distance runner. He was 51. A marathoner for the 1952 U.S. Olympic team and the first president of the New York Road Runners Club — the group that organizes the marathon — he was one of just 55 finishers in the first race, which was held entirely in Central Park. Corbitt finished in fifth place in a time of 2:44:15, a superb time for a 51-year-old even today.

The marathon has changed since Corbitt ran it in 1970. The route moved out of the park and through all five boroughs. And 2 million spectators line the streets today. The constant amid all that change is Corbitt — and half a dozen other finishers from the 1970 race. They will be back Sunday; Corbitt estimates it will be his 15th marathon.

"When you're retired, you have the time to do the training," said Corbitt, who worked as a physical therapist until just a few years ago. "And the challenge is there." These days he racewalks the course.

His training has consisted of several 30-mile walks along the Hudson River, from his Manhattan home to Tarrytown and back. Each one is a daylong excursion.

As he trains, he indulges in fantasy, wondering "if you're about to die and you're going to be able to repeatedly see only one thing, over and over, what would you choose?"

"I haven't decided yet, but it's between watching a 100-meter race, a 10,000-meter race — or a beautiful woman."

And, with that, he gets from start to finish. Others follow a more traditional marathon training regimen, but with less total mileage — about 25 to 30 miles a week — than is standard.

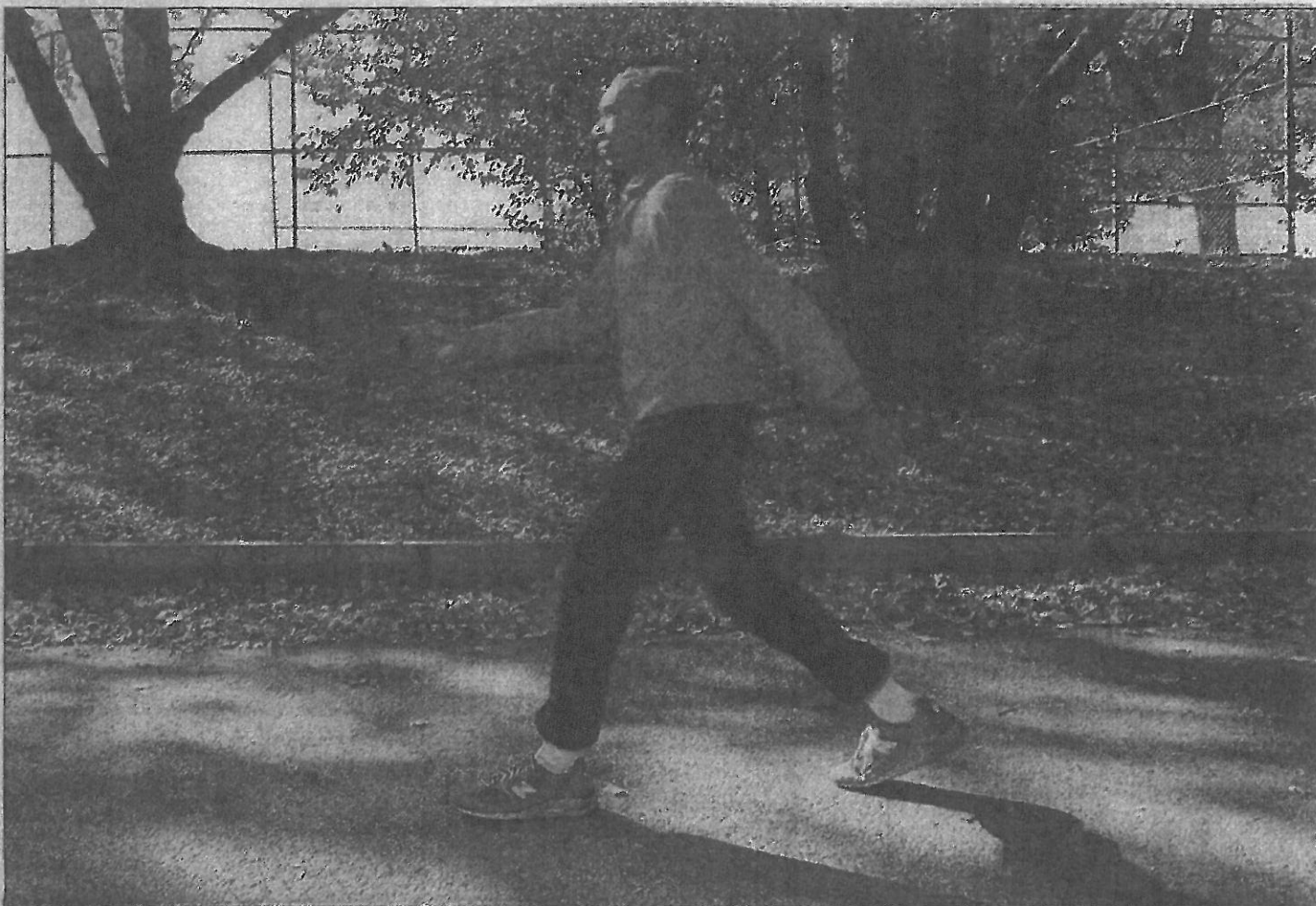
Corbitt's hope this year is to finish the marathon in less than 7 hours.

Others hope simply to finish. "I never dreamed of doing a marathon until I was 65," says Ira Brotman of North Babylon. "I never had the time when I was working." But after he retired from his job with TWA in 1997, Brotman started running competitively, and his training partners coaxed him into running New York the same year. He wasn't exactly a couch potato when he started, having played in senior soccer leagues for many years. Since his initial marathon, he has completed three others. And he will be on the course again Sunday.

"I suffer for it," he admits, "but I enjoy it." Indeed, the marathon is a punishing event for someone 27 years old, much less 72.

Corbitt, for example, started racewalking when knee injuries and asthma prevented him from running. Schilowitz limped the last few miles of last year's marathon, due to sciatica (lower back pain). Brotman says that because of ill-fitting shoes in his first attempt at New York two years ago, "my toes got crushed."

Bloody toes and torn hamstrings don't seem to be high on the list of retirement joys. Not long ago, any



Newsday Photo / Ari Mintz

Ted Corbitt, 80, training at Van Cortlandt Park in the Bronx: A runner in the first New York City Marathon (held entirely in Central Park) in 1970, he plans to racewalk the course Sunday.



Mavis Lindgren, believed to be the first woman over 70 to finish a marathon (in 1977), is the subject of this book.

70-year-old who told his or her doctor of a yearn to run a marathon would have been ordered to lie down and let the feeling pass. But today, physicians are taking a different view. "I think people should applaud these folks for doing what they're doing," says Dr. Edward Fryman of Seaford, medical director of the Long Island Marathon, which is held every May. But, he's quick to add, "you can get the benefits of exercise without having to do a marathon."

**A**LTHOUGH THE number of senior marathoners has increased, they still make up a small percentage of the total marathon population. According to the USA Track & Field Road Running Information Center in Santa Barbara, Calif., 3 percent of all male finishers in U.S. marathons last year were ages 60 to 69. But, as New York's rising numbers suggest, that may change, too. "People who started running in the 1960s and 1970s, during the Running Boom, will be in that age group soon," says Fryman. "Many of them are still competing, and the serious ones will continue to compete."

Corbitt, who started running distances in the early 1950s—a time when people were more likely to light up a smoke than lace up a pair of athletic shoes—agrees. "I anticipate more people getting involved in the future," he says. "I hear a lot of younger runners say they're going to continue to do it the rest of their lives."

While a Baby Boom-fueled rise in senior marathoning may be in the offing, the older seniors in the New York City Marathon are still rare enough to have become race celebrities—and they have the sound bites and even the books to prove it.

Mavis Lindgren, a Californian who last ran New York in 1995 at age 88, is believed to be the first woman over 70 to complete a marathon—the 1977 Avenue of the Giants Marathon in Humboldt County, Calif., which she ran with her son, a physician. She was the subject of a 1984 softcover book, "Grandma Wears Running Shoes," issued by a publisher of religious books.

"I want to reach out and touch people, to inspire them to reach their potential," said Lindgren. "I want to tell them to dream big dreams and make them come true."

Sam Gadless has an upbeat approach. "Age is just numbers," he said at a press conference before last year's race.

And his appearance is age-defiant, too: he has an Einstein-like shock of hair and wears a peace symbol earring.

Gadless, who once suffered from severe arthritis, now stands erect and says he feels little or no pain in his joints and requires no medication. He credits his daily walking and pool exercise regiment—which he started 15 years ago—and his vegetarian diet.

In fact, he suffered only minor injuries when he was hit by a car near his home last year, while out walking. And, again, he says his lifestyle is responsible for his good fortune.

"I used to eat junk and never exercise," he said. "I was sick as can be. Now I feel great."

"The lesson is that it's never too late to start," Schilowitz can attest to that. The retired dairyman and taxi driver started running at age 80, and doesn't see anything very complicated or heroic about it. "You just have to make up your mind and go," he says. "Just put one foot in front of the other." ■

John Hanc is Newsday's fitness writer.