

On Any

Given Sunday

TED CORBITT

THE FATHER OF LONG DISTANCE RUNNING

By Barry Lewis

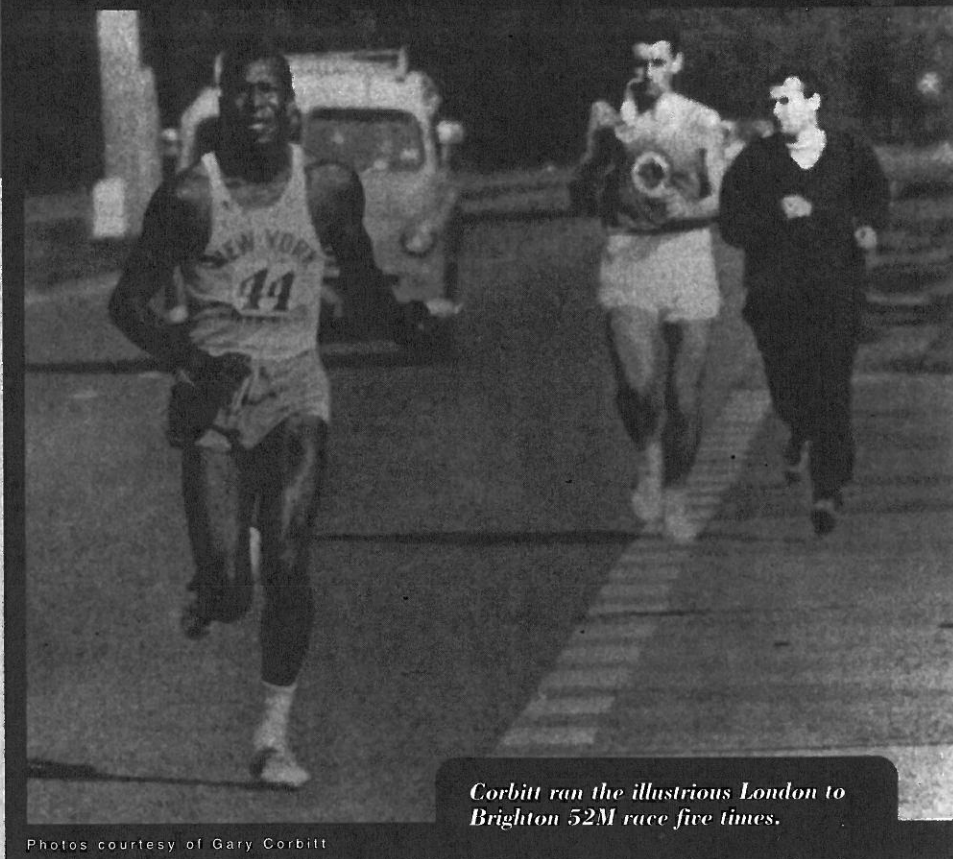
My first encounter with the living legend took place more than a decade ago. Somewhere around the mid-point of a low-key Broadway Ultra Society 70K from Brooklyn to Bear Mountain, when the mind started complaining that the road was too hard, too flat, too straight—and the finish line simply too far away—a stranger appeared. “You’re looking great,” he said, offering water or electrolyte drink to everyone who happened along. “Just keep it loose and relaxed.” I took the water and thanked the man, then my jaw fell open when I realized who it was.

“That was Ted Corbitt,” I stammered to anyone within earshot. “THE Ted Corbitt. Here, at this tiny race. Giving us, a bunch of nobody’s, praise and support.” For those who know, this was like having Michael Jordan stop by the neighborhood court to hand out Gatorade at a pick-up game. But Corbitt is unknown to the public-at-large. To meet him is to realize that he embodies the best in distance running. Despite his mythical status, he is humble, approachable and incredibly real.

Ted Who?

Ted Corbitt was born in South Carolina in 1919 into an African-American family whose existence depended on raising cotton and corn. Ted shared in the farming duties, taking up the plough and picking crops after school, on weekends, and during holiday breaks. Despite being small in stature, he became tough and strong. Young Ted’s wiry frame, work ethic, and quiet demeanor mirrored his father’s, as did his pursuit of excellence in whatever he did.

Racial discrimination was prevalent at the time. Ted walked to school while white children traveled by bus, but he is far from resentful, for he discovered the joy of running along the dusty roads between home and school. At the age of thirteen, after his family had moved to Ohio, he ran



Photos courtesy of Gary Corbitt

Corbitt ran the illustrious London to Brighton 52M race five times.

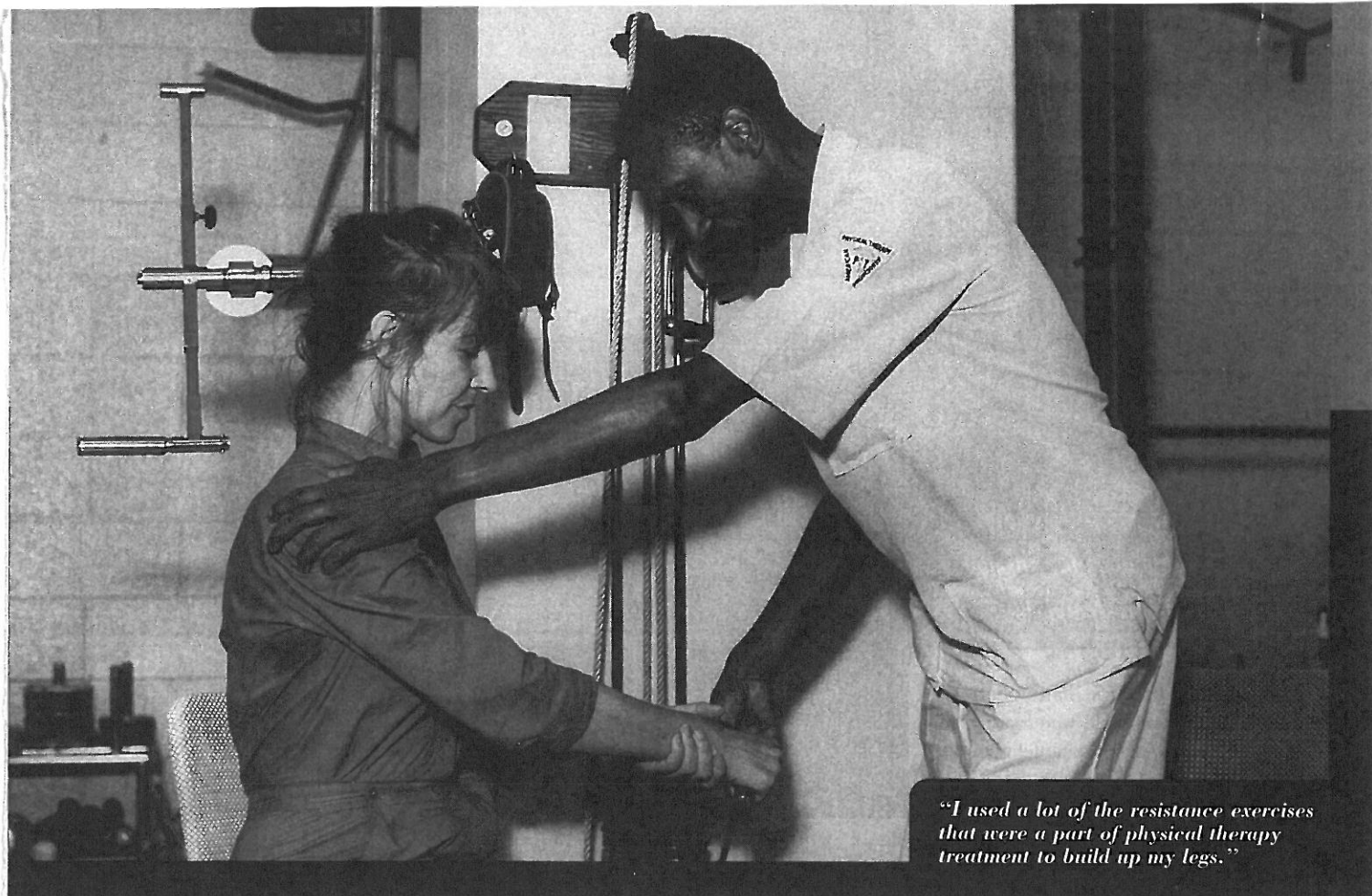
in his first competitive race. Ted competed throughout high school, and it was during this time that he stumbled upon an article that would forever alter the course of his life. Theodore Ellison “Tarzan” Brown, the Narragansett Indian who won the ’36 and ’39 Boston Marathons, was featured in a local newspaper. Ted was stunned to learn that people ran that far.

“The idea of running such a long distance intrigued me,” he recently told me with a chuckle, “because at the time four miles was considered a very long race.” The color barrier limited Corbitt’s running prospects through high school and college, but far from discouraging Ted, it made him all the more keen to compete. By his senior year of college, he was the most versatile runner on his team, excelling in the sprint, quarter mile, and two mile events. In an era when most athletes hung up their sneakers after graduation, Ted emerged from the University of Cincinnati with his masters degree in physical education, with honors—and continued to train.

Army duty, marriage, work and studying to become a physical therapist sidetracked any serious thoughts of competitive running for several years, but Corbitt’s desire never waned. In mid-1950, after earning his Masters from New York University, the 31-year-old’s thoughts returned to a high school vow. “One day I’ll run the Boston Marathon,” he had said to himself, “just to see if I can.”

Imitating Emil

Today, training programs can be found by the hundreds and concepts like intervals, hill repeats and recovery are understood by most recreational runners. Today’s pros use heart rate monitoring, sports psychology, and sophisticated nutritional plans to get the most out of every workout and achieve peak performance whenever they race. It’s tough to picture a time when elite athletes knew little about such things, but when Corbitt began his second running career, he found a dearth of information. He read whatever



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he could find, but soon realized that training for a marathon would be a process of trial and error based on a plan he devised on his own.

In the little literature available, the methods of Emil Zatopek stood out. Zatopek believed that the human body was capable of attaining top fitness if subjected to incremental increases in effort, and with time allowing for adaption. Corbitt began to experiment, using the great Czech's ideas as a foundation upon which he could build.

"Weight training was discouraged and people thought I was crazy," says Corbitt, "but I used a lot of the resistance exercises that were a part of physical therapy treatment to build up my legs." He used Zatopek's method of alternating fast 440's with slow 220's to increase his speed and mixed such workouts with long, slow road runs. He ran in heavy army boots to add difficulty to his routine. He suffered through blisters and bruises and was forced to lay off and recover time and again. Slowly, through the brutally hot and humid New York summer, his legs hardened and he extended his distance. By fall, he felt ready to take the next step: the overdistance run.

"I always felt that if I couldn't get through 30 miles in training, I'd never be

able to race a marathon, so running 30 became a goal. But I always fell apart at about 18 miles and couldn't get past 22 for several months. I never knew why."

The epiphany came in January 1951. Corbitt was bundled up against the winter chill, once again attempting to reach 30 miles. It was snowing, and he found himself catching snowflakes in his mouth as he ran. "A light went on in my head. I was always thirsty, but never drank anything during a run. I realized I was dehydrated almost all of the time." From then on, he put water out whenever he ran more than 15 miles. He smashed through the 30-mile barrier on the next attempt and the distance never seemed that difficult again.

Marathon and Beyond

That April, Corbitt ran his first Boston Marathon, and managed to place 15th despite falling apart in the heat. By today's standards, his time of 2:48:42 sounds far from spectacular, but the winning time of 2:27:45 was the third fastest marathon ever run. A month later, Ted ran Yonkers (2:48:48), and a month after that, the Junior National Marathon Championship in Maine (2:47:28). He made the Olympic Marathon team the following year.

At the 1952 Helsinki Games, Zatopek ran the distance triple that has never been matched, winning the 5,000m, 10,000m, and the marathon, all in Olympic record times. Zatopek's performance convinced Corbitt that his own methods of preparation were on track. The American began training harder than ever before.

The workouts that followed are legendary. Two, sometimes three runs a day, or twice around the island of Manhattan (64 miles) for long distance work. Weekly mileage was often between 200 and 300 and there were times when he put in more than 1,000 miles over the course of a month. All this while working full time as a physical therapist at the International Center for the Disabled, raising a son, and carrying on running-related administrative duties at night.

In a competitive career that began when most runners were considered old and that lasted well into his 50's, Corbitt set American track records for 25 miles, the marathon, 40 miles, 50 miles and 100 miles. He claimed victories at the American and Canadian Marathon Championships, American 50 Mile Championships, and American 30K Championships. Besides the Olympics, he



Corbitt competed in the 1952 Olympic marathon in Helsinki, a race won by one of his rolemodels—Emil Zatopek.

was selected for the U.S. Pan American Games marathon team. He won more than 30 of the 199 races he has completed of the marathon distance or beyond. His 100-mile record (13:33:06, beating the old standard by two and a half hours) came at the age of 50. He ran 134.7 miles in a 24-hour race when he was 54.

Despite being taken out of serious competition by bronchial asthma in 1974 while preparing to make an assault on the record for crossing the U.S. (he felt capable of completing the 2,800 miles from Los Angeles to New York in 42 days), Corbitt continued to run. Just for the love of it, he has taken part in numerous marathons, several 100 milers, and even a few 24-hour races over the past 25 years. At the age of 81, he walked 240 miles in a six-day race, and last year, he bettered that performance by an unbelievable 63 miles. You read correctly: 303 miles in six days, at age 82!

To this day, students of the sport marvel at Corbitt's dedication, discipline and persistence in an era when runners in general were rare, black distance runners were unheard of, and the marathon was considered extreme. Today's serious distance runners call upon tales of Corbitt's "killer weeks" to motivate themselves through the high mileage phases they must endure in pursuit of their own competitive goals.

Leading Off the Race Course

And yet, Corbitt's greatest contributions to running have not been on the track or road, but behind the scenes, where he has toiled quietly his entire career. He was a

member of the New York Pioneer Club, the first president of the Road Runners Club of America, and co-founder and third president of the New York Road Runners Club. He was a shaping force behind the masters division, which re-opened the doors of competition to the over-40 crowd. Perhaps his most significant contribution was the development of the meticulous standards of course measurement followed by the thousands of USATF-certified races that take place in America every year. Without Corbitt's work and his 1964 book, *Measuring Road Running Courses*, it is doubtful that distance running would be anything like the sport we know today.

Ted Corbitt turned 83 last January, but he is still omnipresent at New York area running events. If you've taken part in a New York Marathon, Sri Chinmoy 24-Hour or multi-day race, or anything organized by the Broadway Ultra Society in the past three decades, the chances are that even if you haven't met Corbitt personally, he's seen you putting rubber to road.

Fame and Philosophy

For his part, Corbitt seems almost embarrassed that people have started learning his story. He was one of the first five inductees into the National Distance Running Hall of Fame, joining Bill Rodgers, Frank Shorter, Joan Samuelson,

and Katherine Switzer in the inaugural Class of '98. He was profiled in a 2001 *Vanity Fair* feature about pioneers of extreme sports alongside such notables as Glenn Plake ("big mountain skier") and Tony Hawk ("skateboarder").

"Sure, I sort of used myself as a human laboratory," he says, "but it was no big deal, because I was only doing what I loved." And going about it the only way he knew how.

"My parents always taught me to work hard at being the best at whatever I did. I remember applying that thinking to chores on the farm, but it really took hold in ninth grade in algebra class. I was getting a C+ and wanted to improve my grades, because if you got an average of 94, you were exempted from the final exam. I went to extra after-school classes and studied hard. I went from a 70 average to better than 94. The work paid off. I followed that philosophy through the rest of high school and college, and carried it over to my running. If you work hard, you are sure to improve."

He's right, of course. Time to get out and run. **F**

Barry Lewis is a Philadelphia-based writer who has run more than 60 ultramarathons. Ted Corbitt wrote the forward to his book, Running the Trans America Footrace: Trials and Triumphs of Life on the Road (Stackpole Books, 1994).