

# Ted Corbitt

## Profile of an American Legend

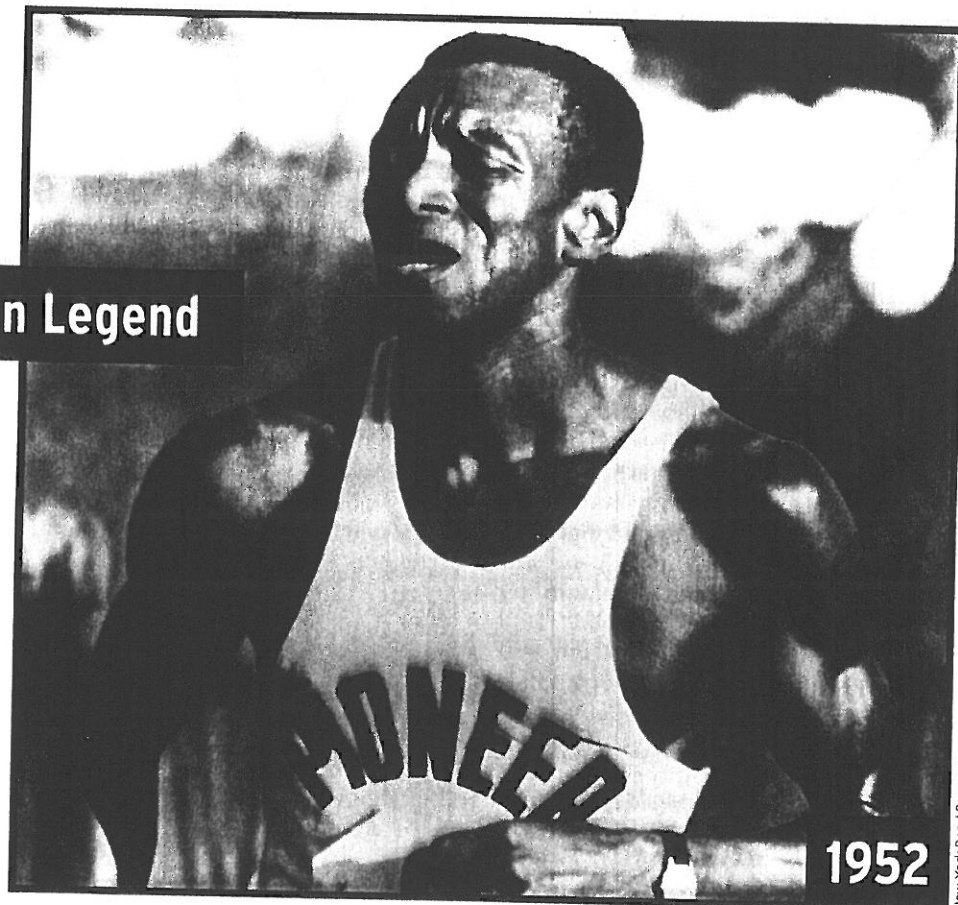
by Jeff Venables

**T**ed Corbitt was born on January 31, 1919 on a farm in South Carolina, the grandson of slaves. He moved with his family to Ohio when he was 9. The future “father of distance running” first heard of the marathon in 1936, at age 17, when he read in a Cincinnati newspaper that Theodore Brown had won Boston. “I was amazed it was possible to run such a distance,” he says. The dream to one day try immediately took hold of him.

### A Dream Deferred

But after attaining his bachelor of science in physical education at the University of Cincinnati, real-world responsibilities took over for a while. A stint in the Army, a move to New York City, marriage, full-time work at the International Center for the Disabled, and graduate studies kept Corbitt busy for several more years. In 1950, at age 31, Corbitt received his masters degree in physical therapy from New York University, then one of only a handful of schools in the country that would accept blacks into a masters program. Then, at last, he set his sights on the Boston Marathon.

Having found almost no literature on training, he experimented on himself. To prepare his body to run 26.2 miles, Corbitt started by applying the now well-established practice of progressive resistance (weight) training, with incremental increases in effort. Many people



thought his reliance on weights was misguided. But Corbitt saw what pulley weight exercises and other resistance mechanisms had done for his rehabilitation outpatients. He persisted. When he finally ran Boston, his first marathon, in 1951, he finished 16th overall in 2:48.

Corbitt was addicted. He ran in the national marathon championships in Yonkers one month later, and finished 10th among Americans in the junior nationals just one month after that. (In the past, a runner could compete in the junior national championship until he or she won a senior national championship.) The following year he placed third among Americans in Boston. Eventually he found himself on the U.S. Olympic Marathon team at the 1952 games in Helsinki.

### Genesis of a Running Club

Corbitt finished respectably at the Games, and won Philadelphia in 1954. He won the AAU Metropolitan Marathon in 1957. He would go on to win both the American and Canadian marathon championships. Still, by 1958 distance running remained but a marginal activity on the American landscape.

“Boxers were actually the only runners I saw around. I used to run races to meet other runners,” he explains.

In 1958 Corbitt and nine friends founded the Road Runners Club of America (RRCA). Later that year he helped organize the Road Runner’s Club-New York Association—now New York Road Runners—and became its first president. He also started the publication that would become this magazine. On February 22, 1959 the fledgling NYRR put on the Cherry Tree Marathon, near Yankee Stadium in the Bronx, with Corbitt winning in 2:38:57. This race was organized annually until the early 1970s.

Once Corbitt became president of NYRR, he felt obligated to research something that had long piqued his curiosity: race course measurement. He designed and measured hundreds of courses over the next several years—not just for NYRR, but for the New York Pioneer Club and RRCA, of which he served as third president. By the time his 1964 book, *Measuring Road Running Courses*, consolidated and reported all that he had learned, the AAU (later, USA Track & Field) began to take his words

as gospel. Corbitt helped organize the first national standards committee for the measurement of race courses. All future USATF-certified courses (and there are thousands) were influenced as a result of his measurement methods.

### The Father of Ultradistance

Meanwhile, Corbitt continued to train. He was fond of running over-distance. To feel ready to complete 26.2 miles, he would often run 30. Incredibly, while living in Brooklyn Corbitt did nearly all of his 30-mile runs on a track. Later, he set 50- and 100-mile records on a track in Walton, England.

Ultramarathoning—beyond the marathon distance—was just a natural extension of Corbitt's ambitious weekly mileage, and a competitive manifestation of his interest in how far the human body could be pushed. He eventually worked up to 300 miles a week. When he moved to Manhattan in 1955, he would run 32-mile loops of the island. For his first running of the famous London to Brighton 52-mile road race, he trained by completing two times around Manhattan's perimeter, totalling 64 miles.

into the National Distance I Hall of Fame as part of the f inaugural class in 1998.

### A Legend Lives On

Corbitt began running at a t it was illegal in many places for blacks and whites to compete in the same events, and many AAU-sanctioned track meets drew the color line. "You could have problems finding a place to stay, or maybe finding food or a convenient toilet," he recalls. During road races he has had rocks thrown his way and cars driven into his path, but he never let racial tension separate him from his passion.

A long-standing battle with bronchial asthma, however, effectively retired Corbitt as a runner in 1974. To stay active, he started walking part of the way to work. (He lives on West 225th Street in the Bronx; his office was on 24th Street and First Avenue in Manhattan.) "I passed by a woman in the neighborhood who said, 'Ted, you finally got everybody and their brother doing it,'" he recalls, "Except me—by then I was walking!"

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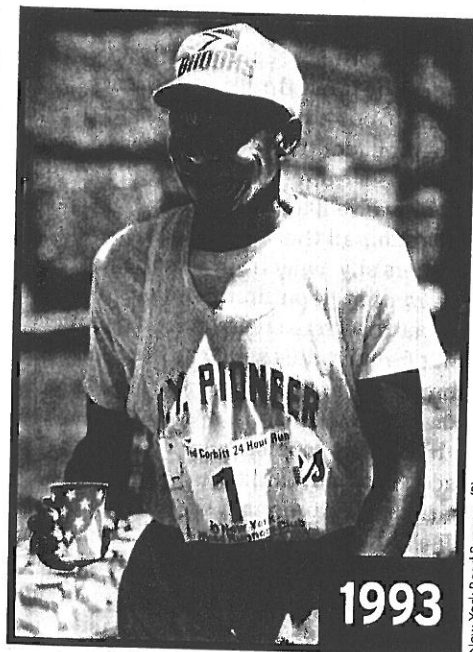
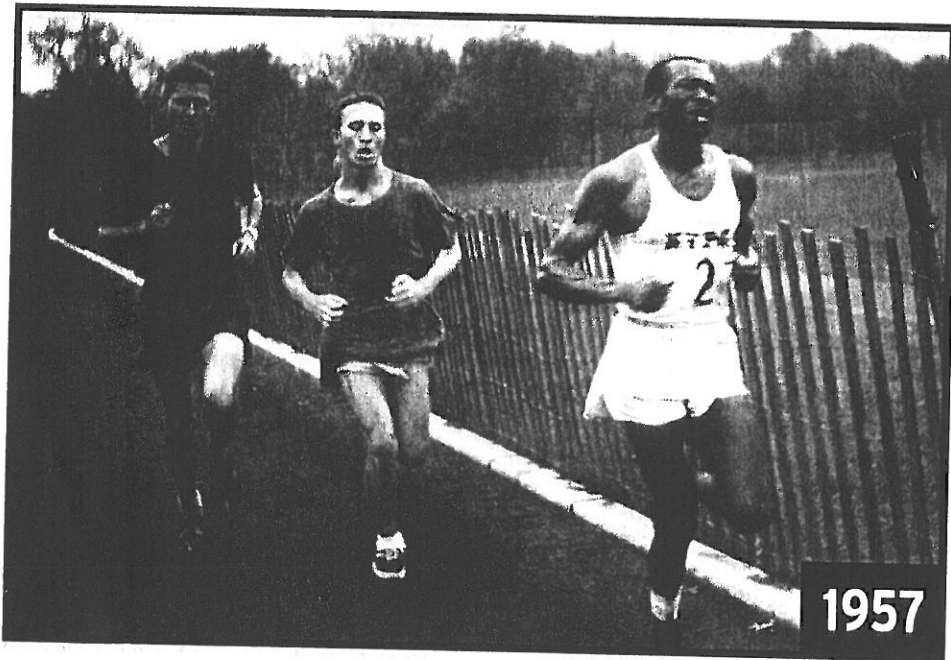
and marathon] races. I'd like to get past 200, as a personal goal."

So what does the father of distance running have to offer by way of advice? He's still promoting weight training. "There's a lot you can do to build up your trunk and arms with even one or two dumbbells," he says. "Even if you stop running, you should continue that."

Not surprisingly, this ultramarathoner is serious about hydration, too. "Enough water and salt," he offers, "is more important than what you eat. Look, there's an ideal diet, but people around the world survive on what's available. Weight training and hydration are more important."

Finally, Corbitt also urges people to get out and walk. "You can get the runner's high from walking, too," he says, "if you walk enough." This is a man who should know.

How do you sum up the impact Ted Corbitt has had on the sport of distance running? He overcame racial



New York Road Runners (2)

By the end of his career, Corbitt had set national records at 25, 40, 50, and 100 miles. The last of these he achieved in 1969, at age 50, besting the old record by two and a half hours. He had finished second in London to Brighton just three weeks prior. Altogether he has won 30 out of 199 races of the marathon distance and beyond. He was inducted

He still is. In 2000, at age 81, Corbitt covered 240 miles in six days at the Sri Chinmoy Six-Day Race on Wards Island, setting an age group record. He smashed that record the following year by 63 miles.

At age 84, Corbitt continues to walk in ultramarathons, and spends a few days a week at the gym. "I'm no longer

barriers, obliterated records, popularized—then utterly redefined—the word "distance," developed modern training regimens, and standardized the sport's most crucial element—measurement. Along the way he also founded the oldest running publication in America and pioneered the masters division. Ted, thank you. ■