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Ted Corbitt, a Pioneer in American Distance Running, Dies at 88

By FRANK LITSKY

Ted Corbitt, who began running as a child on his father's cotton farm in South Carolina and virtually never stopped, becoming a pioneer of ultramarathon running in the United States, died Wednesday in Houston. He was 88 and lived in Manhattan.

His death, at a hospital, was caused by respiratory complications, his son, Gary, said. In recent years, Corbitt was found to have prostate cancer and colon cancer, his son said.

When Corbitt was 55, bronchial asthma ended his elite running career but not his participation in ultramarathons. At 81, he walked 240 miles in a six-day race, with interludes for sleep. The next year, in the same race, he walked 303 miles.

In 1993, the year before he died, Fred Lebow, the founder of the New York City Marathon, called Corbitt "the father of American distance running."

By his own count, Corbitt ran 199 marathons and ultramarathons, which are typically races of 50 or 100 miles or 24 hours. (Marathons are 26 miles 385 yards.) He won 30 of those races and never dropped out of one until he was 75, he said. He trained by running as many as 200 miles a week. In his heyday, Corbitt — shy and slight at 5 feet 7 inches and 130 pounds — was a United States marathon champion and a member of the United States team at the 1952 Olympics in Helsinki, Finland, where he finished a disappointing 44th in the marathon.

At various times, Corbitt held American records in the marathon, the 100-mile run and the 25-, 40- and 50-kilometer events. He also won national American Athletic Union championships in several distance running events. His fastest time in a marathon was 2 hours 26 minutes 44 seconds.

In 1957, Corbitt helped found the Road Runners Club of America; he was later its president. He established guidelines to measure courses accurately for the thousands of nationally certified races. In 1958, he was a co-founder and the first president of the New York Road Runners Club. He was among the first five athletes inducted into the National Distance Running Hall of Fame in Utica, N.Y., in 1998.

Theodore Corbitt was born Jan. 31, 1919, in Dunbarton, S.C. “On the farm, I ran to the store, to the mailbox and to school,” he told Trishul Cherns in a 1988 interview that appears on the Web site UltraRunning Online.

After moving to Cincinnati, he ran competitively in high school and at the University of Cincinnati in half-mile, one-mile and two-mile events. As a young black athlete, he also encountered racial barriers.

“The color line was drawn even in some of the meets in Cincinnati, so I could not participate in them,” he said in the 1988 interview. “In the Midwest, places like Illinois and Indiana, there were track meets, but I was a little reluctant to take part in them because I did not know what type of reception I would get and what problems I would have getting a place to stay and getting something to eat.”

After graduating from Cincinnati with a bachelor’s degree in education and serving in the Army in World War II, Corbitt moved to New York, where, as a night student, he earned a master’s in physical therapy at New York University in 1950. He ran his first marathon, in Boston, in 1951.

In 1959, as the president of the New York Road Runners Club, Corbitt organized the first ultramarathon event in the United States, a 30-mile course through the Bronx and Queens and into Westchester County, said Gail Waesche Kislevitz, a coordinator for the New York Road Runners Foundation. Corbitt won that race, called the Cherry Tree, a forerunner of the New York City Marathon, and went on to organize many more.

Corbitt championed running for exercise long before it became popular in the United States. He never smoked, he said, and had only one drink in his life, a can of beer while in the Army.

His training regimens were legendary. For a time, he ran 200 miles or more a week, often in Van Cortlandt Park in the Bronx and Prospect Park in Brooklyn. He once ran the marathon distance every day for a month. He often ran a 31-mile loop around Manhattan in about 3:45. Sometimes he did two loops. He also trained with weights.

Corbitt was the chief physical therapist at the International Center for the Disabled on East 24th Street in Manhattan. Until 1973, he ran to work every day, sometimes making a 20- to 30-mile detour through Westchester.

He also taught physical therapy at Columbia and N.Y.U., wrote widely on athletics and physical therapy, and officiated at races. On at least one occasion, he ran connected to electrodes to study the effects of running on the body.

He retired from his job in 1993 but remained a full-time physical therapist into his 80s. His wife of 42 years, the former Ruth Butler, died in 1989. His son, Gary, of Jacksonville, Fla., is his only immediate survivor.

“The marathon demands patience and a willingness to stay with it,” Corbitt was quoted as saying in a 1998 book by Ms. Kislevitz, “First Marathons: Personal Encounters With the 26.2-Mile Monster.” “You must be willing to suffer and keep on suffering. 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.”