

Ted Corbitt - The Father of American UltraRunning

A BRIEF HISTORY OF
TED CORBITT'S ULTRA CAREER

After the 1928 and 1929 Race Across America events, in the aftermath of The Great Depression and the all-consuming second world war, the sport of ultrarunning in America was, for all intents and purposes, nonexistent. This was true globally as well, with the single exception of the signature 20th Century ultra event, the annual Comrades Marathon (approximately 54 miles) in South Africa.

The year 1950 saw the inauguration of the London-to-Brighton 52-mile race in England. Five years later a young soldier named Tom Ryan, serving duty as part of the newly-formed NATO forces in Germany, became the first known American after 1950 to compete in an organized ultra - "The Brighton" - running 6:13:24 to take fifth place.

Ryan had been a contender for the 1952 U.S. Olympic Marathon team. One of the three men to beat him to that honor was an anomaly for the era, an African-American named Ted Corbitt. Corbitt had been a successful sprinter at the University of Cincinnati in the 1940s, but after that he gravitated toward the very long distances. In the mid-1950s, road running was in its infancy as an organized sport and Corbitt, in addition to being one of its most successful practitioners, quickly became one of its organizational leaders. In 1958 he was one of the founders of the Road Runners Club of America (RRCA), and shortly thereafter became president of its most influential member organization, the New York Road Runners Club. That same year he was instrumental in garnering the approval of the national governing body, the AAU, for what would be the first officially-sanctioned ultramarathon ever conducted in the U.S., a 30-mile race which Corbitt won in 3:04:13. This victory made him somewhat of a cult hero among the extreme fringe of the ardent American road-running community, and he unwittingly became the ideological standard-bearer of a small national movement that had a propensity to race beyond the marathon distance but did not yet have a name or any events on which to focus.

Within a few more years, The Brighton had now acquired the unofficial status of "world championship" of this sport-beyond-the-marathon which still did not have a name of its own. In 1962, Ted Corbitt, now with a wife and child and a full-time job as a physical therapist, made his first of four trips to The Brighton. After leading the first 20 miles in 2:02, he eventually finished a strong fourth, a performance historian Andy Milroy heralds as "the rebirth of American ultrarunning" after nearly a half-century of dormancy.

Ultrarunning suddenly caught on and quickly grew in America during the next two years. Corbitt immersed himself in ultra competition and training, winning ten ultras in those two years, increasing his individual training runs to over 100 km, and his weekly mileage at one point to over 300 miles.



Photo by SAMSHU SZCZESIUŁ

Ted Corbitt

Once more around the track -
A victory lap,
Though death's come up on the
inside lane,
Never lay your body down,
There is no finish.
There is no line.
Once more around the track.
Let us see your serenest of smiles.
Let us celebrate your sinew and muscle
And marvel at your workman's gait,
Your refusal to wait,
And your absolutely indefatigable
commitment to
Once more around the track.
Father, friend, hero,
Long distance visionary,
Healer with the gentle laugh,
May we run with you?
May we know that same breeze
humming through our ears?
May we know what you think,
Or don't think about
As you log 50, 70, 100 miles,
As you put heel to ground,

As you beat the sound of your
humanity,
Into the yielding earth?
Once more around the track
Sage, mentor, idol.
Who says we can't run the distance?
You did for 88 years.
Who says pain is an obstacle?
It was never enough reason to not do
Once more around Manhattan Island
Once more London to Brighton
Once more around the Olympic track.
So may we carry your torch,
Athlete, scientist, therapist,
gentleman?
May we cheer your name, Ted?
May we catch a last glimpse of you
doing
Once more around the track?
Forgive us if we lay your body down.
Forgive us if we follow your spirit
Once more around the track
Before we dry our eyes
And call it a day.
-Caleen Sinnette Jennings
12/13/07

In 1964 he returned to the London-to-Brighton, whose competitive cauldron and championship status was now solidified by the annual appearance of the top South Africans from the Comrades event. This Brighton was to be a "last man standing" race for the ages, pitting Comrades winner Manny Kuhn and fellow South African John Tarrant against former British Brighton champions Bernard Gomersall and John Smith. Notorious frontrunner Tarrant set a torrid pace, and everyone who had any designs on victory stayed within striking

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distance. Shortly after 30 miles, Tarrant's pace faltered, and Gomersall pounced to take the lead, pulling clear of the field. Corbitt, shadowing the front group, knew he had to go with the new leader at this point, and struck out after the Brit. For the next 20 miles it was a two-man race, and became an epic duel, ever uncertain until the final 400 meters. Corbitt would close to within a few hundred meters, Gomersall would rally to keep the American behind - again and again this accordion would play itself out until the final mile, each man utterly spent to the wire. Gomersall won, 5:39:44 to Corbitt's 5:40:42.

Ted Corbitt went home and increased his prodigious training mileage, racking up a one-week high of 312 training miles despite nursing a series of injuries. He returned to Brighton in 1965, uncertain of his recovery from the injuries. One of his young American proteges, John Garlepp, led the race for nearly 30 miles. This time Tarrant bided his time, then took the lead when the young American began to fade. Gomersall clung to him but Corbitt, now aged 46 and suffering from a collapsed left arch, could not keep pace. Running the last 15 miles with a limp, he caught and passed Tarrant again, but could not close the gap to his British nemesis, finishing second again, by four minutes.

Back in the U.S., Corbitt faced the first challenge to his American ultra dominance. After beating Ted twice at short-range ultras (between 60 and 75 km), Jim McDonagh went up against him at the first ever U.S. National Ultra Championship over the 50-mile distance in July, 1966 in Staten Island, New York. With temperatures soaring to the mid-80s, Corbitt tried to break the scrappy Irish-American with a fast early pace, only to succumb himself as McDonagh hung on for the win. Suffering from heat exhaustion, Corbitt still finished second.

Only two months later both men, still reeling from that debilitating experience, traveled to England for Corbitt's fourth Brighton. Tarrant, Kuhn, and Gomersall again battled at the front, with Gomersall prevailing. McDonagh dropped out and Corbitt, for the first time not a leading contender, had the worst "world championship" race of his life, running 5:52:07 for fifth place. This time he remained in England to take part in an invitational 50-mile track race a few weeks after The Brighton. In that race Englishman Alan Philips set a new world track record of 5:12:39, beating Gomersall decisively. Behind the British pair, Corbitt set his first official American track record of 5:54:15, with what he himself considered a poor performance.

Corbitt did not return to England the following two years, but in 1968 he won the U.S. 50-Mile Championship in Poughkeepsie, N.Y. in 5:39:45, at the age of 48. The next year he did return to England to contest what was still considered the annual world title ultra. Gomersall had retired from competition, and Comrades winner Dave Bagshaw took the win, with the ubiquitous, now nearly 50-year-old American Ted Corbitt taking second again, with a personal best time of 5:38:11 for the 52+ mile distance.

In his best years at this most competitive ultra in the world, the humble American man in his 40s, with virtually no history or tradition behind him, training and performing in an environment still very inhospitable to Blacks, had run several equivalent sub-5:50-milers, on a very hilly course. These performances still match competitively with the top American men of today.

But he wasn't finished . . . yet. Again he remained for a few weeks in England to take part this time in an invitational 100-mile track

race, where he would set a new American Record 13:33:06.

Ted Corbitt now knew that his fastest days were behind him. But he had one "swig song" remaining. In the fall of 1973, at the age of 53, he was invited to take part in a 24-hour track race in England. Despite experiencing muscle spasms in his thigh early in the race, he hung on for 22+ hours, through driving rainstorm, to set yet another American record of 134 miles, 782 yards.

Although his world-class competitive ultra career was now over, Corbitt continued to participate in marathons. In his late 60s an accumulation of various injuries prevented him from running, so he annually walked the five-borough New York City Marathon. At the end of the 21st century, he walked an eight-hour race set up to commemorate his 80th birthday. A year later he walked almost 70 miles in a 24-hour road race. And two years after that, at age 83, he walked 303 miles a six-day race to set an American age-group record.

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adapted from the series The History of North American Ultrarunning, by Dan Bram Executive Director of the American Ultrarunning Association (AUA). This series published in Ultrarunning Magazine in 1998. AUA acknowledges the invaluable historical research of historians Andy Milroy and Nick Marshall, without whose contribution this history would not have been possible.



Congratulating American Suprabha Beckjord at the 2006 3100 Self-Transcendence event.