

Honoring A Real Pioneer

by Elliott Denman — posted on 11/1/2013

Sadly, the New York Pioneer Club has faded away from the track and field scene.

None of those sensational athletes — some proudly wearing their "NYPC" vests, others in singlets simply lettered "Pioneer" — are seen these days on the circuit, running brilliant sprint, middle and much longer distance races, racing sizzling relays, jumping great lengths and throwing heavy objects vast distances, as they did for years and years.

Alas, with the passing of National Track and Field Hall of Famer **Joseph J. Yancey Jr.** in 1991, and his successor as coach/director/man-of-all-tasks **Edward J. Levy** in 2001, the Pioneers were left rudder-less.

Much was said about continuing "the great Pioneer Club tradition." Meetings were held, ideas exchanged, visions shared, but the bottom line — thus far — has been that no one has stepped forward to keep the Pioneers doing what they did so well and for so long, and that was impacting the lives of so many.

In short, that was truly living up to their name — by pioneering.

Long before **Jackie Robinson** joined baseball's Brooklyn Dodgers, **Kenny Washington** signed with the NFL's Los Angeles Rams, and **Earl Lloyd** came aboard the NBA's Boston Celtics and **Chuck Cooper** made the Washington Capitals roster, the New York Pioneer Club was welcoming the world to its burgeoning roster of all ethnicities, all nationalities, all events, all talents.

The lineup of distinguished Pioneers included achievers of all descriptions — on the track and on the roads, or off them. They did so many brilliant things that trying to list them all would be an exercise destined to end here in utter frustration. It's a book waiting to be written. So we won't even start.

But now, on the eve of the 43rd running of the New York City Marathon, the Pioneer Club legacy is front and center once again.

It took **Gary Corbitt**, son of Pioneer marathon and ultra-marathon immortal **Ted Corbitt**, to enunciate it all, at the ceremonies inducting his late, great dad into the NYRR Hall of Fame.

True to form, most of the media spotlight fell on the great champions and fellow inductees — **Joan Benoit Samuelson**, **Frank Shorter** and **Bill Rodgers**.

But almost universally agreed that there wouldn't be a New York Road Runners without Pioneer Ted Corbitt, and there certainly wouldn't be a NYC Marathon without its founding fathers and mothers of the NYRR.

NYRR CEO **Mary Wittenberg**, first at the mike, put it this way:

"Gary, while we still miss Ted every day, he's part of our DNA at New York Road Runners.

"In a running community, our local running community, we talk about Ted a lot as members of our staff and as a team, and try to take in some of his quiet way of influencing as an athlete, as a course measurer, as a healer, and as someone who really cared about other people."

And then Gary Corbitt spelled out the details. Among them:

"New York Road Runners history (and this before **Fred Lebow** came upon the scene) starts with the New York Pioneer Club and Mr. Joseph Yancey, an African-American who co-founded the club in 1936. There wouldn't have been a New York Road Runners Club (starting) in 1958 without the Pioneer Club.

"The Pioneer Club was special, an integrated club made up of all nationalities and abilities and making civil rights history in Harlem and in the Bronx during an era of racial segregation. (Not really overt, but present nonetheless.)

"The beauty and genius of Mr. Joe Yancey was coaching an athletic team that was a vehicle for his primary mission of building men of character.

"**Pamela Cooper**, in her fine book, 'The American Marathon,' states that the New York Pioneer Club is significant in its contribution to democratization of sport, particularly running.

"The club helped to invent the mass marathon culture that we will witness again on Sunday. The huge open fields of today's marathons owe much to Joe Yancey's acceptance of all young men as potential athletes.

"My father joined the New York Pioneer Club in 1947. He considered his teammate John Sterner, who was a racewalker and long distance runner, the founder of the New York Road Runners.

"John was one of my father's early mentors in course measurement approaches. The Cherry Tree Marathon was one of the first events staged by the New York Road Runners association in 1959.

"The race was New York City's showcase marathon during the 1960s, running along Sedgwick Avenue from Yankee Stadium in the Bronx.

"I believe this was the first road course certified in the U.S. A review of the 47 members of the (Road Runners) club in 1959 shows that half were Pioneer Club athletes.

"Of the nine New York Road Runners Club presidents, four represent the Pioneer Club along with my father — **Nat Cirulnick, John Conway** and **Allan Steinfeld**.

"Women were unable to compete in distance races greater than 220 yards in the 1950s, but **Chris McKenzie** and **Ann Cirulnick** were trying to change that. They were married to Gordon (a two-time Olympian) and Nat, New York Pioneer Club teammates, and these were the original running couples.

"Other New York Pioneer Club members who worked tirelessly for us were **Kurt Steiner** who gave me my first basketball; **Harry Murphy**, who recruited my father to join the club; **Lou White** (a marathon champion and USA internationalist) who gave me my first motorcycle ride; **Jimmy Borden**, who went on to start the United Athletic Association, and Pioneer Club coaches Ed Levy and **Horace Wall**."

While much attention focused on the fleet and famed Pioneer "sprint" teams — New York Pioneer distance runners represented the U.S. in four consecutive Olympic Games — Ted Corbitt (1952 Helsinki marathon), **Gordon McKenzie** (1956 Melbourne 10,000 meters and 1960 Rome marathon) and **Oscar Moore** (1964 Tokyo 5,000 meters.)

Pioneers also excelled in the world of long distance racewalking — with a similar roster of Olympians.

Rudy Haluza, whose fourth place finish in the 1968 Mexico City 20k racewalk is still the best-ever U.S. finish in that 12.4-mile event, he was a Pioneer, too.

Extra, extra, read all about it — how did the word get out on those early NYRR events?

Long before there was a Long Distance Log, or a Runner's World, there was the newsletter printed on a mimeograph machine plunked down on the Corbitt family kitchen table. Those copies not hand-distributed at races were mailed by Mrs. **Ruth Corbitt** — wife of Ted, mom of Gary — to interested parties beyond the city.

To Gary, "she was always so supportive (of her husband) with his legendary training, his administrative paperwork that often kept him typing past midnight, and his continuing education in physical therapy."

And then there's **David Katz** (now ranked as the world's foremost course measurement expert) — he was a protege of Ted Corbitt, as well.

As Katz often says, "I owe so much to Ted Corbitt; he showed me the way."

"What is it, David, 30 years at our (marathon) finish line, 35?" asked Wittenberg.

"David was so inspired by Ted as a course measurer that now David carries on internationally with the highest standards in measurement in road running."

Gary Corbitt's five-word summation of his Dad: "In giving, he was receiving."

Mary Wittenberg's eight-word summation of the Corbitt presentation: "Thank you so much, Gary. That was beautiful."

A block of New York's West 228th Street — near the Corbitt home in the Marble Hill section — is now named Ted Corbitt Way. It's perfectly fitting — Ted Corbitt showed the way to so many others.