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Ted Corbitt's 100,000 Miles

A 5-YEAR-OLD boy in Kansas recently completed a marathon. If he runs about 200 more of them in his lifetime, he'll catch up to Ted Corbitt.

A friend of mine reported that he knew the jogging craze was real when he saw two women in lockstep on a road in New Mexico 15 miles from the nearest town. Ted Corbitt has run well over 100,000 miles in his lifetime, or, as he estimates with a moving finger that spans continents, "Coast to coast and back 20 or 25 times."

Seven Wall Streeters formed a running club called the Tourists. They discuss business as they run eight to 10 miles a day in lower Manhattan. Ted Corbitt, when he is in serious training, runs what he calls "loops." A loop is once around the whole of Manhattan, 31 miles. This takes him around 3 hours 45 minutes. Some days, when he is very serious, he does two loops. This takes him eight hours.

When they return from trips to the hinterlands or abroad, New Yorkers today are likely to talk about the best places to run: Lake Shore Drive in Chicago, the malls of Washington, D.C., along the Charles River in Boston, around the U.C.L.A. campus in Los Angeles, through the parks of London and Paris. Ted Corbitt knows more about the side streets of the Bronx and the avenues of Manhattan.

There was a 100-mile run in Queens last month. The winner received the Ted Corbitt Cup.

Who is Ted Corbitt?

I first heard of Ted Corbitt many Boston Marathons ago. Veterans of long-distance campaigns, then an exclusive corps of ascetics, would drop the name in conversation with a reverence that suggested he was a saint while they were humble impostors. I would ask them to elaborate, and they would mumble something about 100-mile races and 24-hour races, and their voices would trail off as if they were unworthy to be on the same planet, much less road, with him. If you weren't a runner, you just wouldn't understand Ted Corbitt.

They probably were right. My position on long-distance running was stated eloquently by President Carter years later. He had run cross-country in high school, briefly, quitting because it was "too painful to be fun."

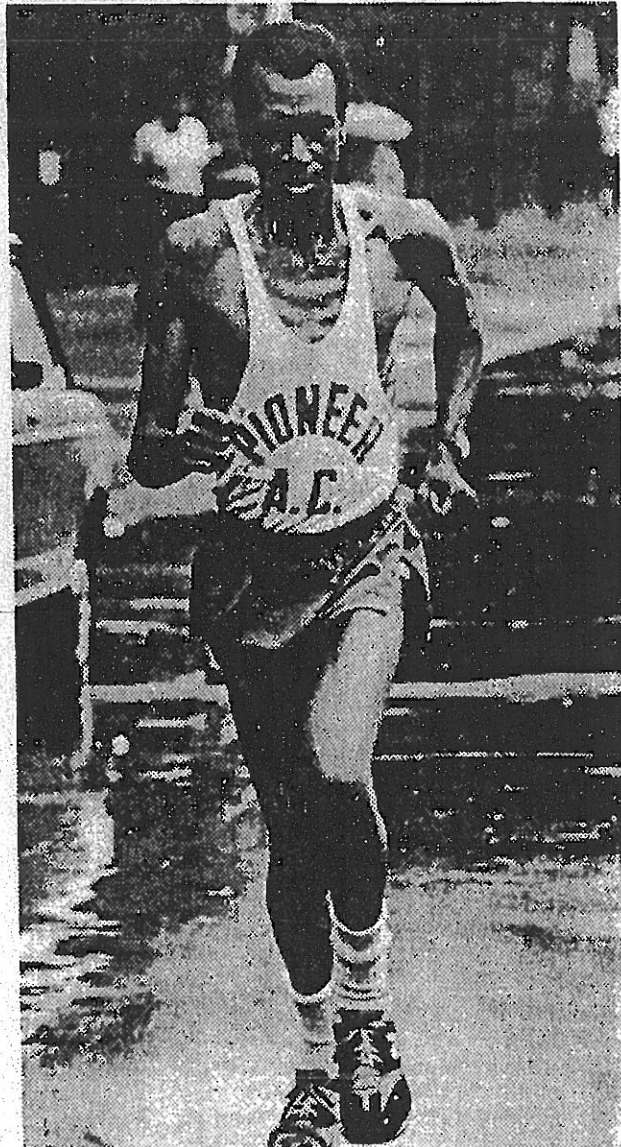
Now I am a confirmed jogger (of the nonpainful persuasion), which is why I am sitting next to Ted Corbitt on a bench along Central Park West. If he didn't invent city running, he certainly improved on it. He is a source.

"My neighbors and relatives, and my mother, used to think I'd drop dead from running," he said. "Now I see these gray-haired ladies running in the park, not only looking like runners but really fit. It continually amazes me."

Ted Corbitt is wearing green cotton pants, a white shirt over a white T-shirt, soft-sole shoes. Except for the outer shirt, this is what he usually runs around New York in. "Street shoes are kinder to the feet than running shoes," he said.

I listen to this as I might listen to the wisdom of an old jazz man in Preservation Hall in New Orleans telling me the advantages of the cornet over the trumpet. Ted Corbitt is 58 years old and black. I saw him on another day at the I.C.D. Rehabilitation and Research Center, where he is the chief physical therapist. There he seems lost in paraphernalia. Here, as joggers pad by, he seems larger and livelier, though his skin clings to his skeleton like bark. Music is all the life left in those old jazz men.

Ted Corbitt's story is this. As a child he ran to and from school in a town in South Carolina that no longer exists. He was an undistinguished quarter-miler in high school in Cin-



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Ted Corbitt: Serious runners consider him a saint

cinnati and at the University of Cincinnati. Why keep running, then? "I had an inner drive that kept renewing itself," he said. After World War II and a master's degree at N.Y.U., he started training for the marathon. He was then 30. Two years later, in 1952, he made the Olympic team.

He has run in some 190 marathons — more by far than anyone else — and finished all of them. His best finish in the Boston is sixth, twice. His goal is 200 marathons. "I'll get them," he said. Right now he has a sprained ankle and an injured hip. He is hurt a lot, because he refuses not to finish. "It's foolish," he said.

While supporting his wife and son, Corbitt saved money to travel to wherever his muse could be indulged. Yes, he did run in a 100-mile race and a 24-hour race (134 miles), in England. He has run in ultra (double) marathons and 50-milers, some of them so close together that just thinking about them hurts.

"In the marathon the fatigue zone is from 18 to 23 miles," Corbitt said. "In a 50-miler you get tired at 30, but the race just begins at 35. In the 100 you feel it from 60 to 64 miles, but the 80-to-85 zone is notorious. In the 24-hour race you're in too much pain to fall asleep."

A loner, shy and possessed, Ted Corbitt keeps ghosting the streets of the city. The story is told of a fellow who watched him for years running into a subway station. "Man," the fellow said, "that cat's always late."

But he always gets there.