

Ted Corbitt to be inducted into New York Road Runners Hall of Fame

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By Wayne Coffey / NEW YORK DAILY NEWS

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Ted Corbitt was known for his incredible distance running, and his final finish line is the New York Road Runners Hall of Fame.

There is no evidence that Ted Corbitt ever met Jackie Robinson, but they would've had some things to talk about. Both were African-American sons of the South, men who left behind cotton to take on Jim Crow, who smashed barriers and changed the world well beyond their athletic orbits.

Both were also men of unyielding will, which Robinson manifested with the whole nation watching, and which Corbitt, a longtime Bronx resident, did so much more quietly, with a healer's touch, a pioneer's courage and feet that just did not stop.

"My father was an inspiration to many people, and that's a special feeling to have," said Gary Corbitt, before flying up from his Jacksonville home to New York, where his late father will be inducted Thursday into the New York Road Runners Hall of Fame, along with Bill Rodgers, Frank Shorter and Joan Benoit Samuelson, in advance of Sunday's New York City Marathon.

Six years after his passing at age 88, and almost six decades after he was founding president of the New York Road Runners, Ted Corbitt remains a towering figure in the running world, no matter that he was 5-7 and 130 pounds. A day after Corbitt became the first African-American U.S. marathon champion by winning the Yonkers Marathon in 1954, the Supreme Court made its historic Brown v. Board of Education ruling to effectively launch the modern Civil Rights era.

Corbitt can't claim to have influenced the Court, but he was his own sort of social force, a distance runner of color when that was exceedingly rare, and a metronome in shorts and singlet — a man who ran a total of 199 marathons and ultra-marathons, and was renowned for his 31-mile training runs around Manhattan Island.

On Labor Day weekend, he did the 31-mile loops twice. Corbitt was so dedicated to training that he would routinely run 200 miles weekly. He was so consistent in performance that it staggers the mind; Corbitt ran Boston in two hours, 48 minutes and 42 seconds in 1951 — at age 32. He ran Boston in 2:49:16 in 1974 — at age 55.

“I consider Ted the pivotal foundation person in the modern running scene,” said Amby Burfoot, who won Boston in 1968 before commencing a long career as an author, writer and editor at Runner’s World. “He was one of the first serious American distance runners, absolutely unique in his personality and unmatched in the sum of his contributions.”

A 20-year resident of the Marble Hill Projects in the Bronx who did most of his running for the New York Pioneer Club — an integrated club that was founded in 1936 — Corbitt was honored last summer when a stretch of W. 228th St. in the Bronx was renamed Ted Corbitt Way, a fitting tribute for a man who probably pounded more New York City pavement than anyone in history. His quietly affirming manner brought untold runners into the sport, and his boundless work in course and distance certification helped give the burgeoning road-running circuit much-needed legitimacy.

For all of that — Corbitt was also one of the first full-bore ultra marathoners, competing in 50- and 100-mile races — Corbitt’s most enduring contribution may have come with his hands, and his knowledge of the human body. For some 30 years he worked as a physical therapist at the International Center for the Disabled on E. 24th St., running to work, of course, encouraging patients to listen to their bodies, and open their minds, and keep going.

Ted Corbitt was married to his wife, Ruth, for 42 years. At age 81, he completed a six-day walking race, covering 240 miles. A year later, he sped things up, covering 303 miles. On Thursday morning, Ted Corbitt will be honored posthumously, and his son will accept the honor, for a man who fought the same fight as Jackie Robinson, just more quietly.

“My father did a lot of things,” Gary Corbitt said.