

## The Uncrossed Desert and The Unclimbed Ridge

“For this is what America is all about. It is the uncrossed desert and the unclimbed ridge. It is the star that is not reached and the harvest that is sleeping in the unplowed ground.” Lyndon B. Johnson managed to capture the American Spirit in his brief quote. The American Spirit endures and challenges boundaries – physical, chronological, and racial. American Spirit is driven by intense curiosity about limitations and how to push them higher or further than was ever thought possible. The American Spirit is personified in Ted Corbitt, who during Lyndon B. Johnson’s presidency, was living in New York City, working full time as a physical therapist, and even at age 44 making history in the sport of American road racing (Seely). Corbitt, a hero unknown outside the world of competitive running, became “the father of long distance running,” while overcoming racial prejudice and demonstrating that with dedication and passion, the human body knows no limits.

Theodore Corbitt was born January 31, 1919 in Dunbarton, South Carolina, on the same day as Jack Roosevelt Robinson, better known as the Brooklyn Dodger’s Jackie Robinson. There were other parallels in their lives: both men were named after President Theodore Roosevelt (Innamorato) and both men would achieve greatness in their respective sports and peacefully challenge the racial views of the time ([The Official Site of Jackie Robinson](#)).

Early in life, Corbitt’s parents encouraged him to see the importance of doing his best at whatever he undertook. As a youngster, Corbitt saw a film about the 1932 Olympics and a photo story about Tarzan Brown winning the 1936 Boston Marathon, which inspired him to run competitively and someday enter in a marathon (Seely). At the time, the sporting world

believed the marathon distance was the ultimate test of human endurance and that the human body could not handle distances longer than 26.2 miles.

In high school Corbitt ran sprints and later at the University of Cincinnati. Corbitt's long distance dreams were deferred by prejudices of the times. Blacks competed in sprints and only sprints at that time, if they were allowed to compete at all (Innamorato). Corbitt, along with his fellow black team members were sometimes turned away from hotels and restaurants and even barred from competing at certain schools (Bloom 123). After college, Corbitt was not allowed to attend Cincinnati area track meets. Undaunted, Corbitt looked to road races, which were less restrictive. In 1947, after moving to New York, he joined the New York Pioneer Club, a small distance running club that accepted minorities (Seely). But reality, in the form of having to make a living – holding a job, attending night school to get his Master's Degree in physical therapy, eventually serving two years in the military, marrying, and starting a family – left Corbitt little real time to train until after age 30 (Seely).

It was assumed most runners' best days were behind them once they reached age 30 but Ted Corbitt would break that presumption. He modeled his training after the best long distance runner in Europe at the time, Emil Zatopek of Czechoslovakia (Seely). Within one year, Corbitt entered the Boston Marathon and placed 15<sup>th</sup>. In 1952, he entered the Yonkers Marathon and placed third, which qualified him for the 1952 Olympic marathon squad (Bloom 124). But due to an error in New York Times reporting, Corbitt did not know he had made the team until only a short time before the race so he entered the Olympic marathon ill-prepared (Innamorato). Despite his lack of preparation, Corbitt ran in Helsinki against the world's best distance runners and finished in 44<sup>th</sup> (Bloom 124).

By 1954 Corbitt had won three of the four marathons he had entered and was finding that the 26-mile distance was too short (Bloom 125). He wanted to see if he could go longer

and began entering 30, 40, and 50-mile races (Innamorato). Corbitt also adapted his training program to prepare for these longer distance races. He began routinely running 200 miles a week, eventually working up to 300 miles a week. Normally, Corbitt woke early to run 20 miles to work and then would run home at the end of the day, covering a total of 40 miles a day. On days he knew he would “be lazy” in the afternoons he would wake at 4:00AM and run 30 miles, arriving at work on time as he always did at 9:00AM. He would then run the direct route home of 11 miles (Bloom 124-125).

By 1969, Corbitt had become famous at home and abroad. He twice entered and placed second in what is considered the world ultra marathon championship, the London to Brighton 52.3-mile race. In that year he also set the American record for 100 miles covering the distance in 13 hours 33 minutes and 6 seconds (Osler 146). Corbitt was becoming famous at home because of his habit of frequently running around the entire perimeter of Manhattan Island twice for a total distance of 62 miles. Even in New York City in the late 60’s, police stopped Corbitt hundreds of times on his training routes simply because he was a black man running through the city (Innamorato).

In 1973, Corbitt set another American record by covering 134.7 miles in the span of 24 hours (Osler 146). The next year, he ran the Boston Marathon again, finishing in 2 hours and 49 minutes, only a minutes slower than his first Boston Marathon 23 years earlier. That same year he was diagnosed with bronchial asthma but continued participating in marathons and ultra runs (Seely). Before his running diminished, he had complete 199 marathons and ultra marathons (Bloom 125). Corbitt always finished every race he started, regardless of injury, 100-degree heat, or freezing temperatures (Innamorato).

Unlike today’s professional athletes, whose sport is their job, Corbitt was also putting in a 40-hour workweek as a physical therapist at the Institute of Crippling Diseases in New

York City. He served as president of the New York Road Runners Club and found time to be the editor for the club's monthly newsletter. The accomplishment Corbitt is most proud of though, is not his incredible athletic times, his consistent running well into middle and old age, or the fact that in his life time he has run the equivalent of the earth's circumference 10 times. He is most proud of his role in the Standards Committee (Innamorato). In 1950, the United States had only four marathons and no standard for the marathon distance. A runner could travel anywhere from 25 or 28 miles. Thanks to Corbitt and the Standards Committee, today's marathon distances are standardized at 26.2 miles and there are now over 100 marathons in the United States (National Distance Running Hall of Fame).

In 2003, at the age of 84, Ted Corbitt was still breaking limits. He covered 240 miles in a six-day ultra marathon race, a record and a first for his age group (Cherns). He also participated in the honorary Ted Corbitt 24-hour run, where he covered 68 miles on a quarter mile high school track in below freezing winds on a cold November night (Arlt).

Through his entire life, Ted Corbitt lived the American Spirit, showing a caliber of endurance and a passion for his sport rarely matched by any athlete. Corbitt continues to be a larger than life athletic figure, and to his friends he is the embodiment of "all that is good in humanity (Innamorato)." Now well into what most would see as old age, he still sets goals to challenge himself. Corbitt has said, "If I learn to race walk with the proper form, I might have a shot at two unfulfilled goals; walking 50 miles in less than 12 hours and 100 miles in less than 24 hours (Seely)." The incredible determination of Corbitt and his ability to cross the "uncrossed desert" and climb the "unclimbed ridge" makes him a shining example of America's own ability to push through obstacles and pioneer the highest reaches of human accomplishment. Corbitt's curiosity about his own limits and how far and fast he could go mirrors America's curiosity about how great a country can become. What inspired Ted

Corbitt to run is the same principle that inspires America to burst from its own starting block to become the greatest country in the world. Said Corbitt, "It took a lot of work to be able to run any real distance but I started because I was interested to know if I could do it."

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