

Ted Corbitt and the Modern Marathon

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Ted Corbitt was the first Black American Olympic marathoner (Helsinki, 1952) and the first president of New York Road Runners. His many contributions—in leadership, technology, competition, training, and physical therapy—make him the single most effective individual in establishing the American marathon as a modern sport.

The Marathon in Mid-Century America

In the United States in the 1950s the marathon was seen as little more than an exhibition event, gaining widespread attention only once every four years

at the Olympics. Marathon courses varied widely; even at the Olympics the marathon distance had not been standardized until 1924.

In the United States, local road race organizers often measured courses with automobile odometers,^[1] and inconsistencies in course calibration subjected records to dispute and dismissal.

Long-distance runners followed middle-distance training programs rather than specializing for the marathon. Marathon running came under the bureaucratic aegis of the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU), which denied celebrity to the event and denied resources to its practitioners.

Ted Corbitt's Journey to the Marathon

Ted Corbitt (pictured above, right) grew up with running and segregation. Born in South Carolina in 1919, he ran two miles to and from elementary school as Black children were not provided buses. When he was 7 his family moved to Cincinnati, OH, where Corbitt competed in track races in junior and senior high school—yet as a member of the University of Cincinnati track team he was barred from some competitions because he was Black.

Corbitt moved to New York City in 1946 and in 1947 he joined the New York Pioneer Club (NYPC), a Harlem-based, racially integrated track club with an agenda of civil rights activism. After receiving a master's degree in physical therapy in 1950 and while practicing at the International Center for the Disabled (ICD) as a staff physical therapist, Corbitt devoted his spare time to training for the marathon. He ran the Boston Marathon in 1951, placing 15th in 2:48:42.

Historian John Chodes describes this period as the “Dark Ages” of marathon running, when “little was known and less written about training.”^[2] With his

knowledge of physiology and talent at distance running, Corbitt was ready to fill that void.

Marathoners as “Second-Class Athletes”

Corbitt and other distance runners faced many challenges. One was that American society of the 1950s disapproved of the individualistic long-distance runner, who ran along public streets no matter what the weather. Aldo Scandurra, later a president of NYRR, remembered that track runners looked down on long-distance practitioners: “Athletes regarded road runners as second-class athletes.”³

Another challenge was that marathoners generally reached their performance peak in their late 20s or later, when most of them had to balance training with earning a living and often supporting a family. The athletics bureaucracy rarely supported or even encouraged marathon training. There were few publications; information about distance running was most often available only among those lucky enough to find a cohort such as the NYPC.

The low status of American distance runners became starkly apparent at the 1952 Helsinki Olympics, where Emil Zatopek of Czechoslovakia won the 5000 meters, 10000 meters, and the marathon in a world record time. The top American finisher, Victor Dyrge, finished 13th; Corbitt (#999 in the photo below), who had made the team due to outstanding performances at the Boston and Yonkers marathons, placed 44th.



Corbitt documented his Olympic experience in *The Physical Therapy Review*,⁴ noting the separate residential facilities set up for the USSR and other Soviet bloc countries⁵ and commenting on the scheduling of the 1952 U.S. Olympic Trials just two weeks before the Games. "An additional few days or a week of rest and treatments would have made a big difference in the performances of some of the athletes—including several potential gold medalists,"⁶ he wrote. The American sport bureaucracy seemed to neglect the needs of its Olympians, while the Soviet bloc offered its athletes state support.

In the U.S., antagonism between the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) and the AAU discouraged collegians from running marathons. Runners on college teams, particularly if they were on track scholarships, had to get permission to compete for their schools in AAU events, and some were forbidden to enter any AAU events. AAU regulations undermined many club track teams and kept college track runners from long-distance racing and

training.⁷

In any case, few American marathons even existed, and only Boston consistently offered top international competition. In 1954 the Boston Marathon had 148 starters, the lowest number since 1945.⁸ The Shanahan Catholic Club of Philadelphia began an important annual marathon in 1954, with Corbitt winning the inaugural race in 2:36:06⁹ and setting his lifetime best of 2:26:44 there on January 5, 1958.

A New Organization for Distance Running

On February 22, 1958, H. Browning Ross, a 1948 Olympic steeplechaser, met with nine other runners at the Paramount Hotel in New York City¹⁰ to create the Road Runners Club of America (RRCA), an organization that would assert the rights of long-distance runners. The RRCA was modeled on the Road Runners Club of England¹¹ but Ross had also seen the NYPC successfully challenge the AAU on matters of segregation and exclusivity and had been coached by Joe Yancey, the NYPC's activist coach, during an AAU tour.

The RRCA encouraged the formation of local running clubs, and in June 1958 Corbitt became the first president of the Road Runners Club–New York Association (RRC–NYA), which evolved into NYRR. He went on to become the president of the RRCA in 1960-1961 and used the office to turn the marathon footrace into a modern sport.

Corbitt knew that the creation of a dedicated bureaucracy was the first step toward modernizing the marathon.¹² Under his leadership, the RRCA continued the tradition of protest and mass action that had developed in Harlem and expanded under Joe Yancey, and over time, the RRCA infiltrated the AAU hierarchy. Eventually the AAU granted the RRC–NYA sanction to

hold open races that any AAU-registered athlete could enter. Equality of opportunity is another characteristic of modern sport;¹³ now, there were more chances to compete and more athletes who were official competitors.

In New York City, the Metropolitan AAU finally accepted RRCA-sponsored events because Aldo Scandurra, a competitive marathoner, had become co-chairman of the Metropolitan AAU Long-Distance Running Committee.¹⁴ On September 14, 1964, the RRC–NYA became a member of the Metropolitan AAU.¹⁵

The Precursor of the New York City Marathon

On February 22, 1959, the RRC–NYA sponsored its first marathon, the Cherry Tree Marathon, at Macombs Dam Park in the Bronx; Ted Corbitt won in 2:38:57.

Corbitt strengthened the national long-distance running bureaucracy with a quarterly newsletter, which he largely wrote and entirely edited, published, and distributed. The publication codified the rules of road racing with articles such as "How to Measure Road Race Courses."¹⁶ With equal conditions of competition, runners all over the country could compare performances and evaluate their own abilities.¹⁷

More than any other single factor, Ted Corbitt's 30-page report detailing the various systems of course calibration¹⁸ established the marathon as a modern sport. The AAU Standards Committee, created in 1965, used Ted Corbitt's 1964 book, *Measuring Road Racing Courses*, for their guidelines.

"My initiating the accurate course measurement program in the USA is easily the most important thing that I did in the long distance running scene,"¹⁹ Corbitt said. His quantification of the marathon helped legitimize the

event. The RRCA instituted the bicycle-wheel method of course calibration, raising the level of quantification for road racing courses all over the United States.²⁰

Corbitt also provided information on training and racing for runners of all abilities as the editor of the Road Runners Club New York Association Newsletter, a post he held from 1958 to 1978.²¹

The First New York City Marathon

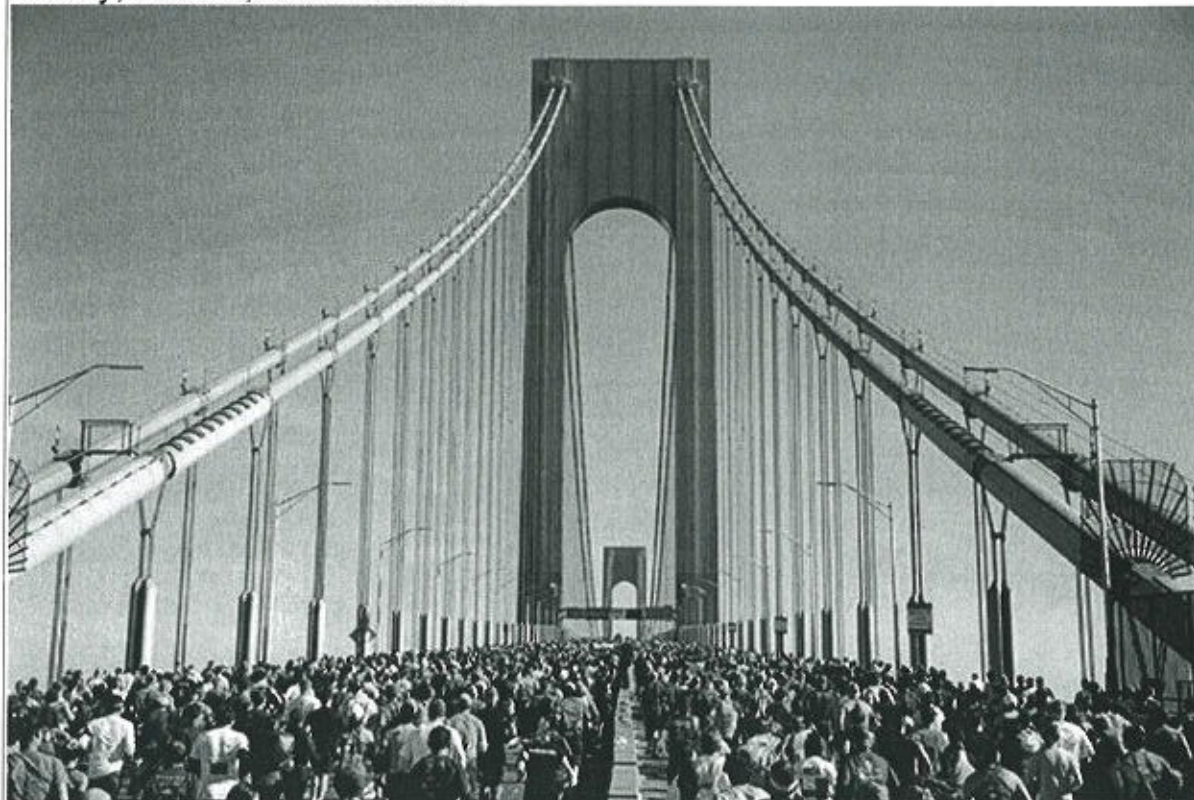
Marathon fields increased through the 1960s. Writing in *The New York Times*, Hal Higdon compared joggers to baseball fans; but, while the latter could never play in the World Series, the diligent joggers could reasonably aspire to the Boston Marathon. Having developed endurance more than speed, they entered the marathon for the satisfaction of finishing—and yet they were official entrants.²² The path to the “running boom” of the 1970s was opened.

The first New York City Marathon took place on September 13, 1970, on the roads of Central Park with 127 entrants and 55 finishers.

Six years later, having outgrown the park’s four-loop course and encouraged by ever-increasing fields nationwide, NYRR took the marathon to the five boroughs of New York City. Ted Corbitt’s course calibration guaranteed a legitimate record, attracting elite runners such as Bill Rodgers and Frank Shorter.

The 1976 New York City Marathon had over 2,000 entrants and 1,549 finishers. The exponentially increasing fields of the following years turned a local footrace into a spectacle that would attract the world’s attention and

emulation. The 2019 TCS New York City Marathon, the largest marathon in history, had 53,640 finishers.



Ted Corbitt completed his final ultramarathon, 68.7 miles in 24 hours, in 2003 at age 82. In 2007, in his acceptance speech of the Lifetime Achievement Award at the Runner's World Heroes of Running Ceremony, he said, "In addition to training extensive mileage, I spent years doing administrative stuff in the background, to help our sport survive and grow."²³ He passed away at age 88 on December 12, 2007.

Learn more about Corbitt in the [Ted Corbitt Archives](#), an invaluable resource for any running historian. Learn more about the New York Pioneer Club in [our blog post from earlier this year](#).

Endnotes

1. John Chodes, *Corbitt: The Story of Ted Corbitt, Long-Distance Runner* (Los Altos, Calif.: Tafnews Press, 1974), 73.
2. Chodes, *Corbitt*, 5.
3. Aldo Scandurra, "History of Long Distance and Road Racing," *Long Island Running News* 1, May 1981, 9.
4. Ted Corbitt, "The 1952 Olympic Games," *The Physical Therapy Review*. Vol. 32, No. 12 December, 1952 pp. 650-652. [Ted Corbitt Archives](#), accessed 14 June 2021.
5. *Ibid.*, 650.
6. *Ibid.*, 651.
7. Congress, Senate, Committee on Commerce, NCAA-AAU dispute: Hearing before the Committee on Commerce, 89th Cong., 1st Sess., 16-27 August 1965, iii-iv, 604.
8. David E. Martin and Roger W.H. Gynn, *The Marathon Footrace: Performers and Performances* (Springfield, Illinois: Charles C. Thomas, 1979), 172.
9. Chodes, *Corbitt*, 150.
10. Gar Williams and Jeff Darman, "History of the Road Runners Club of America," in *The Road Runners Club of America Handbook: A Guide to Club and Race Administration*, edited by Gar Williams (Published by the Road Runners Club of America, 1978), 208-218.
11. H. Browning Ross, Editor of Long Distance Log and founder of the Road Runners Club of America, interview by author, 16 January 1992, Woodbury, New Jersey, tape recording.
12. Allen Guttman, *From Ritual to Record: The Nature of Modern Sports* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), 21, 45. In *From Ritual to Record*, Guttman describes ancient sport as originating in "sacred festivals," and the rules that bound the athletes were often religious in nature and rigid in practice. But modern sport is secular and characterized by a "bureaucracy of

functional roles." In addition to secularization and bureaucratization, Guttmann noted other characteristics of modern sport: equality of opportunity to compete (26), specialization for a particular event (39), rationalization of the conditions of competition (42), quantification (47), and records (51).

13. Ibid., 35.

14. Amateur Athletic Union, Minutes of the Annual Meeting of the Amateur Athletic Union 1962, 25.

15. Ted Corbitt, "History of the Road Runners Club: The RRC, New York Association," Road Runners Club New York Association Newsletter, 22 Fall 1964, 1.

16. Ted Corbitt, "How to Measure Road Race Courses" RRC Footnotes, October 1, 1962. [Ted Corbitt Archives](#), accessed 14 June 2021.

17. Guttmann, From Ritual to Record, 42.

18. Chodes, Corbitt, 147-49.

19. [Ted Corbitt Archives](#), accessed 10 June 2021.

20. Williams and Darman, "History of the Road Runners Club of America," 211.

21. [Ted Corbitt Archives](#), accessed 10 June 2021.

22. Hal Higdon, "Jogging is an In Sport," New York Times Magazine, 14 April 1968, 36-52.

23. [Ted Corbitt Archives](#), accessed 18 June 2021.

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