

Saying Goodbye to Ted

As Long As One Person Remembers Ted, He Will Never Die.

BY GAIL KISLEVITZ

St. Stephen's Methodist Church, the old wooden structure where friends and family came to say goodbye to Ted Corbitt, is a little jewel, more than 100 years old. The small, round sanctuary with the oak pews softened from years of loyal church worshippers formed a crescent with Ted, resting in his treasured New York Pioneer Club sweatshirt, as its centerpiece. Around his neck was a finisher's medal from the 2007 New York City Marathon that his son, Gary, had run and dedicated to his dad. It was a personal gesture, very fitting to the aura of the occasion, as it was the family side of Ted Corbitt that was remembered at his wake and funeral, attended by friends who went back 40 years and had plenty of Ted stories to tell. Honored guests at the funeral eulogized Ted not as the legendary father of long-distance running but as the family man and friend with the gentle spirit. As is often the case at wakes and funerals, the occasion brought laughter and humor as well as tears and sadness. Gary Corbitt recalled later, "I never saw so many grown men with tears in their eyes."

Corbitt's obituary was covered by just about every major media outlet in the nation, including the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Washington Post*, *Sports Illustrated*,

► Ted powers his way through a 2006 Thanksgiving Day 10K race in his hometown of Cincinnati, Ohio.



The Enquirer/Gary Landers

and *USA Today*, as well as the Web sites of the Road Runners Club of America, the New York Road Runners, the Armory, and the International Association of Athletics Federations. The articles covered Ted's career from his humble beginnings on a cotton farm in South Carolina through his ultramarathon events and his participation in the 1952 Olympic marathon. The writers covered his times, his distances, his involvement with modern-day measurement of road race courses, and his acclaimed work as a physical therapist. He was still seeing clients until two months before he died on December 12, 2007, at age 88. By all accounts, Ted was admired and loved by the entire running community—past, present, and those to come who will read accounts about the father of long-distance running.

Nina Kuscsik, whose friendship with Ted goes back to the late 1960s, worked with Ted in establishing the ground rules for the RRCA, AAU, and NYRR. Very similar in personality, they both preferred to be in the background and let others take the stage. Nina was one of the pioneer women in a male-dominated sport, the first official female winner of the Boston Marathon in 1972 and the winner of the 1972 and 1973 New York City marathons. Ted always made her feel comfortable and accepted, and she recalled RRCA meetings in Boston where everyone sat on the floor discussing rules and regulations. “Ted didn’t say much, but when he spoke, everyone listened. He was respected by all.” At the wake, she told a story about running the 1973 Holyoke Marathon and passing Ted at 23 miles. “I hated to pass him, but I did. Ted would never want anyone to hold back.”

PUTTING TED INTO PERSPECTIVE

David Katz, the U.S. delegate to the technical committee of the IAAF, which sets standards for measuring courses, knew Ted from their shared passion of road race course measurement. He summed up the feeling in the room at the wake: “Ted was my God. I thought he would live forever.”

Many of the friends who came to say good-bye to Ted were members of the New York Pioneer Club, founded in early 1936 by Joe Yancey, an African American mortician and member of the United States Track and Field Hall of Fame. The name was chosen because members were accepted without regard to race or qualifications. It was unique in its time and attracted many elite runners who wanted to be part of a club that stood for sound principles. Bernard Cooper, a member of the club with Ted and chairman of the board of directors for New York Road Runners from 1998 to 2006, joined the Pioneer Club after returning home from World War II in 1946. According to Cooper, “The New York Pioneer Club was just about the only place in town where blacks and Jews were welcome to join a running club.” Ted joined in 1947 on his return from the war.

At the funeral, the Reverend Oscar Moore, a visiting clergyman from Glassboro, New Jersey, spoke of his early days with Ted in the New York Pioneer Club. Moore joined the Pioneer Club in 1961 straight out of the Marines. He was quickly



Photograph courtesy of New York Road Runners

▲ Ted competing in a 10-mile race with the New York Pioneer Club at Van Cortlandt Park, Yonkers, New York, in the late 1950s. Left to right: Gordon McKenzie, Tom O'Brian, John Sterner, and Ted Corbitt (in the lead).

befriended by Ted, who took the younger man under his wing. Soon they were running the Empire State Building steps just for the fun of it. Although a middle-distance runner, Moore says Ted always encouraged him to run a marathon. He must have seen promise in Moore, who won the first and only marathon he ever ran, the 1964 Pearl Harbor Memorial Marathon. “I really didn’t like distance,” says Moore, “but it was Ted’s passion and he tried hard to convert me.” With Ted as an unofficial coach, Moore made the 1964 U.S. Olympic team and competed in the 5,000-meter run. In 1980, Moore left New York City to attend college and become a minister. While away, he and Ted corresponded. “Ted typed all his letters and sent them with a self-addressed, stamped envelope so you would write back,” says Moore, who still has the letters. “If he only filled half a page, he would cut it in half and save the remainder of the page for another letter.” One of the last times Moore ran with Ted was in the 1960s. Ted asked Moore to join him for a training run at West 86th Street in Manhattan but didn’t tell him the route. “I thought we were just going out for a run and had no idea I was joining Ted on one of his legendary runs around Manhattan,” recalls Moore. “I dropped out after 25 miles, exhausted, but Ted kept going. He didn’t even look tired.”

TED’S “WACKY” THERAPEUTIC TECHNIQUES

Sarah Yuster, an artist from Staten Island, was another friend of Ted’s who saved his letters. But unlike Moore’s letters, hers were handwritten. “Ted wrote

beautiful, long, handwritten letters describing his life, which I cherish,” said Yuster. A former competitive runner, Yuster met Ted in 1984 when she was sent to the International Center for the Disabled (ICD) for rehabilitation following orthopedic surgery. She knew nothing of his Olympic history or track records, just that she was told only to see Ted. As Yuster recalls, “I waited two and half hours to see him. Finally, I was shown to a room, and in walks this slight black man in a long white coat. He doesn’t introduce himself, only says hello in a whispered voice. He starts working on me with the strangest techniques, like having me repeat, ‘I am getting better.’ Some of his techniques were standard, but others just seemed wacky. I finally asked him if he was indeed Ted Corbitt. I was just a bit shocked as he seemed so frail, silent, and deep in thought.” After that first session, she became familiar with his technique, which she describes as a true gift. “It was apparent that he had a remarkably unusual character. Touch was his main medium. He spoke very little, always taking meticulous care with his patients, many of whom had severe handicaps. Always concentrating intensely, he was completely and quietly consumed with exploring the most effective treatments for each one. He often worked through asthmatic stress and spent extra hours and days off helping colleagues and clients.”

They formed a friendship, and Ted treated her without pay for a year after her insurance ceased. He came to her art shows and was a frequent dinner guest



Courtesy of Corbitt family

▲ Ted treats a patient during his 44-year career at the International Center for the Disabled, where he was chief physical therapist.

at her house. “He was part of our family,” says Yuster. Her husband, Robert Mosci, a pianist/singer who performs at the Water Club in New York City, suffered tendinitis in his hands and back pain from piano posture. Ted helped him immeasurably with both. In return for the treatment, Mosci installed Ted’s first computer in his apartment, enabling Ted to reach out to more folks. Anyone who has ever received an e-mail from Ted can thank Mosci.

Yuster and Ted spent many hours talking on the phone. She recalls one conversation that sticks in her mind: “I called him late one night around 11 P.M. and asked what he was doing. He said ‘darning socks,’ and I responded, ‘What the hell are you thinking, Ted, with all the good you could do, and all the books there are to read or write, why are you wasting your time? I’ll buy you socks!’ He laughed and said that it was an old habit from growing up on a farm where things had to be used and reused.”

To Yuster, Ted was much more than the famous runner. “Ted possessed an immense store of information on nutrition, homeopathy, and training techniques as well as subjects ranging from art and music to writing, physics, education, and computer technology. He also possessed a wonderful sense of humor, dry and light as moon dust.”

TED’S ROLE IN WORLD WAR II

Nancy Linday was also a former competitive runner who was sent to Ted at ICD. Linday, an urban planner from Manhattan, enjoyed long walks around Manhattan with Ted. “He was the consummate New Yorker,” says Linday. “He knew more about Manhattan than the professional tour guides.” They also enjoyed going to the movies. She recalls going with Ted in 2003 to see

The Fog of War, the movie about Robert McNamara’s role in World War II and the Vietnam war. Afterward, they discussed the movie over hot chocolate. “Ted told me about his military experiences during World War II. I couldn’t imagine this peaceful man in a war setting.” Ted graduated with honors from the University of Cincinnati and was planning to pursue his studies to



Courtesy of Corbett family

◀ Home from World War II with his sweetheart, Ruth Butler, whom he married in 1946.

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become a chemist when Pearl Harbor was attacked. During his time in the army, he spent six months on Okinawa and another six months on Guam. He tried to stay in shape, but running through the jungles was too dangerous, so he built a gym inside his compound.

Lindsay says she will miss his delicious sense of humor and his laugh. “I loved to see him laugh. He’d throw his head back, get a crinkle in his eye, and just laugh to beat the band.” Almost everyone who knew Ted comments about his eyes. He was a handsome man, but his eyes first captured people’s attention. When you looked into Ted’s eyes, you saw kindness.

Most people knew Ted only as the legendary runner, but Rod MacNichol knew the many sides of Ted. A member of the New York Pioneer Club since the early 1950s, he admired Ted even before meeting him. “He was my hero. I grew up following his career,” says MacNichol, a veteran of more than 100 marathons and the 1976 London-to-Brighton race. He accompanied Ted on many of the Manhattan loops. After the 32-mile trek around Manhattan, they would end up at Ted’s apartment complex. “The first time we did this, I was exhausted and was standing near the elevator, waiting for it to open. Ted looked at me and said he didn’t take the elevator. We had to walk up the 15 flights of stairs as our cool-down.” After the workout, Ruth, Ted’s wife, prepared MacNichol a huge breakfast of bacon and eggs, pancakes, and coffee. Ted would eat his normal breakfast of seeds or whatever he was experimenting with at the moment. MacNichol recalls the time Ted came to his house in Connecticut, where he was organizing a three-day running seminar. Ted called ahead and requested Jell-O and mashed potatoes. That’s all he ate for three days.

MacNichol calls Ted the consummate gentleman. Even when confronted with bigotry, Ted held it together. After the 1956 Boston Marathon, where Ted placed sixth in 2:28:06, MacNichol, Ted, and a few others who ran that day were returning to New York and stopped at a diner in Connecticut to grab some lunch. “We were sitting at a table and the waiter refused to serve Ted,” recalls MacNichol. “I couldn’t believe it. Ted was embarrassed but didn’t say anything, and he stood up to leave. We all stood up with him and left that place.”

GENEROSITY WITHOUT END

Ted’s generosity was well known to his friends, but MacNichol didn’t know the depth of Ted’s giving and compassionate nature until Ted casually told him what he sometimes did on his lunchtime runs. Ted was famous for his three-times-a-day workouts. He ran to work, about 20 miles, then ran at lunchtime, and then ran home at the end of the day. His lunch run started at the ICD, located on the lower east side of Manhattan. Ted stopped on his runs, gave food to the homeless, and ministered to their medical needs. “I thought that sounded awfully dangerous and

► Ted (center) in 1962 with RRCA members Kurt Steiner, left, and Aldo Scandurra.

I worried for his safety, but Ted just couldn't pass by without helping them. He was always giving," says MacNichol. Ted was so giving, in fact, that he gave away the gifts that MacNichol gave him. "Ted showed up at races with his running gear in a paper shopping bag," says MacNichol. "I couldn't believe it. We all had nifty duffel bags, and here was this legendary runner carrying a shopping bag. So I went out and bought him a three-piece set of luggage. He seemed grateful, but a few weeks later at a race, I saw the set of luggage on the prize table. The biggest piece was first prize, the middle size was second prize, and so on. Ted had regifted my gift!"

John J. Kelley and Gordon McKenzie, both U.S. Olympians, were also friends of Ted as well as competitors. According to Kelley, Ted was known as Mr. Dependable. He could keep a steady pace better than anyone else. "A lot of runners thought they could beat Ted and went out fast to prove a point. Of course, they blew up and got passed by Mr. Dependable," says Kelley. He would call Ted for advice on treating his injuries. "Ted was always so giving and so helpful. He spent hours with me on the phone explaining how to treat an injury." Kelley tells a story about the day he and a group of Connecticut runners were driving down to New York for a race and passed Ted running on the Pelham Parkway, heading north. "We stopped the car to say hello and asked him why he was running on the parkway. He explained that he wanted to add more miles to his Manhattan loop, so he was running to Connecticut."

McKenzie, also a member of the New York Pioneer Club, recalled that Ted was so revered and renowned that he was able to get legendary icons such as Percy Cerutti and Arthur Lydiard to come and talk to the club members. "He was the finest gentleman I ever met. A true joy," says McKenzie.



Photograph courtesy of New York Road Runners

TED'S INSIGHTS INTO THE TRUE VALUE OF PEOPLE

Joseph Perez, who spoke at Ted's funeral, calls Ted an inseparable friend. Born in Manhattan in 1942 with cerebral palsy, Perez underwent 13 operations and spent 25 years as an outpatient at Columbia Presbyterian Hospital in New York City. Nothing seemed to help alleviate his pain. At age 11, he started lifting weights and went on to become a two-time U.S. Paralympic bench press champion and in 1985 was the first person with cerebral palsy to run the New York City Marathon. But as a youth with a handicap and severe dyslexia that went undiagnosed, by age 16 he was labeled as retarded. He first met Ted as a patient at ICD in 1967. He was not aware of Ted's fame as a runner. All he saw was the best physical therapist he had ever seen. "Ted was a pure scientist. He took an interest in me that other doctors never did. He went to the core of my problems," Perez said. They became fast friends.

It wasn't until they went to a race in Central Park that Perez realized what an icon Ted was in the running community. He describes a scene where everyone who saw Ted came over and shook his hand. Ted and Joe went everywhere together, especially to the movies. They watched all the great classics, and then Perez introduced Ted to the films of Quentin Tarantino. "I was a little nervous when I took him to see *Kill Bill: Vol. 1*, but he loved it. He laughed all through it. He was able to see the dark humor and the irony in it," said Perez. But their relationship was much deeper than movies and Joe's corny jokes. Ted trained him to run the New York City Marathon and was at the finish waiting for him. "Ted saw in me what others didn't, that I was an athlete capable of doing things no one ever gave me credit for. He listened to me." Ted also gave Joe a gift more valuable than sports. He gave him dignity. In 1979, Ted organized a physical therapy conference at ICD and invited the top professionals in the business to give lectures on various topics. He asked Perez to be a speaker at the conference,



Photograph courtesy of New York Road Runners

► At age 84, Ted walked 68.93 miles at the 30th anniversary of his 1973 USA record of 134.7 miles in a 24-hour race. Location: Astoria Park, New York.

assuring him that he knew as much about physical therapy as the professionals because of all his years in hospitals and the accomplishments he had made.

“I was terrified,” recalls Perez. But he did it, and afterward he cried. “I can’t describe what Ted did for me that day. He took a man who was once labeled as retarded and gave him the opportunity to prove he was worth something. That’s the gift Ted gave me.” When the critiques of the conference were summarized, Perez received the highest score for his presentation.

Perez describes Ted as a fine man who never lost his temper, never raised his voice, and always had a kind word for everyone. One of their favorite things to do together was going to running events. He recalls a night they attended the Millrose Games. Perez had received free tickets and invited Ted to accompany him. When they arrived at Madison Square Garden, the ticket taker recognized Ted and immediately escorted them to the VIP entrance, an upgrade from the general admission tickets. While riding in the elevator, Perez recognized Joe DiMaggio. “I start yelling like a kid, saying to Ted, ‘Oh, my God, it’s Joe DiMaggio,’” recalls Perez. “Ted just stood quietly in the corner reading the event pamphlet. When DiMaggio looked over to see what idiot was making all the noise, he recognized Ted and came over to shake his hand, saying ‘It’s nice to meet you. I understand you are the greatest runner in America.’” According to Perez, Ted quietly said to DiMaggio, “Well, that’s a bit of an exaggeration.”

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That same night, while Ted and Perez were walking to their seats, a man roughly the same age as Ted came over and gave him a hug. Ted didn't recognize him at first, but then the man introduced himself and reminded Ted that they had both competed in the 1952 U.S. Olympic Marathon Trials. The man then became somber and said he wanted to make a long-overdue apology. It seems that at the Trials, this man and a few others decided that a black man shouldn't be allowed to represent the United States at the Olympics and made a secret pact to prevent Ted from winning a spot. "We boxed you in, we kicked you, we tried to trip you, we did everything we could to take you down, but you managed to get away and win that spot. I've regretted my behavior for years, and I just wanted to say I am sorry for what I did." Ted replied, "You guys gave me a great run. If it weren't for you, I may not have run so fast." Perez will never forget that moment and how Ted handled himself. "He was the perfect example of the way to live life."

"TUESDAYS WITH TED"

Joe had introduced Ted to Jack Mantione, a young physical therapist who became Ted's student in 2001. The three met every Tuesday evening and discussed every topic under the sun while Ted and Mantione worked on Perez's shoulders and neck. Perez refers to those nights as Tuesdays with Ted. According to Mantione, Ted taught him everything that isn't in textbooks. "He always told me it is how you use the information in books that can change people's lives. I truly believe that Ted rose to a state of perfection. I never met anyone who had the capacity to love that Ted had."

Mantione has incorporated Ted's wise advice and teachings in his practice, such as this Tedism: "Not tapering off your training gradually one to two weeks before a race and overtraining (not knowing when to rest between training) will decrease your potential to perform and can lead to injury. It can also make the difference between winning and not winning." Another Tedism: "Athletes are only as good as their last injury. We have enough medical professionals treating injuries; what we need is more injury prevention."

All these people and others who attended the funeral mourned Ted and their loss of a good friend. His niece, Linda Fairbanks of Cincinnati, spoke about her uncle and his close ties to his family. Ted was one of five siblings, and Linda's mother is now the sole survivor. "We looked forward to his visits," says Fairbanks. "He was very caring and always gave us massages." She recalled how he was always sending them gifts, and they never knew what to expect. It could be a box of chocolates for his mom or a book on asthma for Linda. "One time he sent a large box, and we all got excited about what could possibly be in it," says Linda. "It was a complete volume of cassettes on the importance of drinking water." Ted's mother lived to be 103, and everyone thought Ted would beat that age. "We miss his visits. He was so giving and full of love."

Richard Innamorato, a longtime friend of Ted's and a fellow ultrarunner, wrote a eulogy for Ted on the day he died:

"Today the music has died for the running community and for humanity. Ted Corbitt has sadly passed away at the age of 88 at the M.D. Anderson Center in Houston, Texas. We all know his legendary feats as a runner, but he was even a far greater person. He led by example every single day, and his character, dedication, kindness, and values all touched our lives. We are richer to have known him or known of him. May he always rest in peace and be blessed by God."

Ted will be missed by everyone who knew him. For such a quiet, shy, and gentle man, he was a powerful force. Six weeks after Ted's death, Rod MacNichol reached for the phone one morning to call his dear friend. It wasn't until he had dialed the number that he remembered he was gone. "I hung up the phone and cried," he said. Perez and Mantione now have a standard line whenever they have to make a decision: "What would Ted do?"

EVERYONE WAS ALWAYS WELCOME AT TED AND RUTH'S

It is Ted's son, Gary, who endures the greatest loss. A month after his father died, Gary was in his father's apartment going through his clothes. "I was sorting through piles of all his old running warm-ups and race shirts, and at the bottom of this huge

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► Ted with his son, Gary, and wife, Ruth, after the Olympic Trials marathon in Yonkers, New York, in 1956.

pile, I found his Olympic uniform. I just lost it.” At the funeral, Gary recalled that, as a child, he read his father’s daily training logs instead of comic books. As a child, he and his mother went to the Yonkers Marathon, where Gary handed out water to the runners and always waited for his dad at the finish line. He spoke about his mother, Ruth, and how she and Ted were true soul mates. “She understood his gift and gave him his freedom to use it,” he said. He recalled as a child seeing runners at the apartment who came in for races. Some stayed for a day, some for weeks, and one runner stayed for an entire



Courtesy of Corbitt family

year. He likened his mother to Jessie Kelley, the late wife of John J. Kelley, as the women behind the legends who held it all together.

Gary will spend most of 2008 holding celebrations in honor of his father, some public and some personal—such as running his first Boston Marathon and joining the annual 32-mile Run Around Manhattan in January, an event organized by Dave Obelkevich, an ultrarunner friend of Ted’s. “This was the first time Ted wasn’t at 228th and Broadway to greet us,” said Obelkevich. Gary will have to make decisions on donating his father’s writings, trophies, and other valuable belongings. After speaking to Ted’s friends at the wake and funeral, some of whom he didn’t know, Gary was touched at the impact his father had on so many people.

Joe Perez summed up the legacy of Ted when he spoke at the funeral. He asked all to rise and raise their hands high in a celebratory gesture to Ted, and said: “We are here to celebrate the greatness of Ted. Do not mourn, as he has not left us. He lives on in our hearts. He was a prince among men in this life, and now he is head coach of God’s running team. Honor him by trying to follow in the footprints he left behind.”

The world will be a better place if we can indeed strive to follow Ted’s lead.

