

Photos by Joe Greene

This trio of ultramarathoners may differ in age, but their fixed stares reflect the same willingness to push themselves to the limits of physical and mental endurance.

What Makes Them Run and Run and Run?

by Jim Shapiro

One of the world's most grueling athletic events is also one of its least-known. It's the ultramarathon, a 50-mile or 100-kilometer (62.1 miles) race—far longer than the 26.1 miles of a standard marathon.

The next scheduled ultramarathon is the Metropolitan Championship 50-mile AAU run scheduled for New York's Central Park on Nov. 6. If this ultramarathon runs true to form, it will draw only a sprinkling of spectators, no interest from the media and only the barest glance from the weekend strollers in the park.

But this lack of outside interest doesn't bother the contestants in the least.

The intense drama each runner endures as he fights off the crushing mental and physical fatigue of the later stages of the run is mostly internal. Only a breathless gulp of water or a strained face suggests the cost of bashing along 50 miles of asphalt roads for anywhere

from 5½ to 7 hours.

Ask them why they take on such awesome feats of endurance and such rigorous training (often upward of 200 miles a week) and the answers, diverse as they may be, commonly cite a love for running and extreme challenges.

Among ultramarathoners the best known is soft-spoken Ted Corbitt, a New York City physical therapist whose long running career is legendary. In 26 years he has completed almost 200 marathons and ultramarathons, including the 1952 Helsinki Games marathon.

Two decades later—at age 53, when most men are content to just admire the trophies on their shelves—Ted Corbitt took on an heroic 24-hour run in Walton-on-Thames, England, on a quarter-mile cinder track. He covered 134.7 miles, shuffling through the last seven hours in almost unendurable pain to finish third.

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"Running is just something I did growing up in South Carolina, running a couple of miles to school and back," Corbitt said. "I just kept it up as I got older and found more and more challenges in it. You just do the things you have to or want to do. Running is a different world nowadays. In the early 1950's my first running shoes were a pair of old tennis sneakers. There just wasn't a lot of information around on how to prepare for ultradistances."

On his own, Corbitt took on rigorous training, sometimes running around Manhattan Island twice in a day (a total of 62 miles); twice he ran 100 miles nonstop through the city streets.

One of the best known of the younger ultramarathoners is Park Barner of Enola, Pa. Last year he won the 300-kilometer (186.3 miles) C & O Canal race, which begins in Cumberland, Md., in 35½ hours. The race is usually covered in three days in 100-kilometer legs, but Park felt he could run it straight through. His time includes a 4½-hour rest stop for a snooze and breakfast to ward off hypothermia, a disabling drop in body temperature, brought on by the nighttime cold of 18 degrees Fahrenheit.

Ran in corridors

Barner, a 33-year-old Pennsylvania state employee who at first startled his co-workers in Harrisburg by running in building corridors on his lunch hour, said: "Nothing special got me going into running. It's just wanting to run farther and farther all the time. Running just makes me feel better. And I enjoy the notoriety, letting people know I can do well at these distances."

Barner's reputation for possessing iron legs is based in part on his having often run a marathon and a 50-mile race on the same weekend in different cities. He definitely prefers longer distances.

"A standard marathon is too fast," he complains. "It's just about an all-out race for me, whereas a 50 seems like a training run because I can run slowly, which I prefer." Even Park's "slow" running has netted him the current American record of 7:11:44 for 100 kilometers.

Tom Osler, a professor of mathematics at Glassboro (N.J.) State College and himself a veteran of ultras during 23 years of long-distance racing, noted that "up until 10 years ago you had to ignore a lot of ridicule for training out in the streets. Ultra runners set their own goals and are rewarded by their own sense of achievement."

One of America's fastest ultramarathoners is Max White of Alexandria, Va. He is a comparatively youthful 26 in a sport where competitors go on improving into their mature 40's.

Delayed gratification

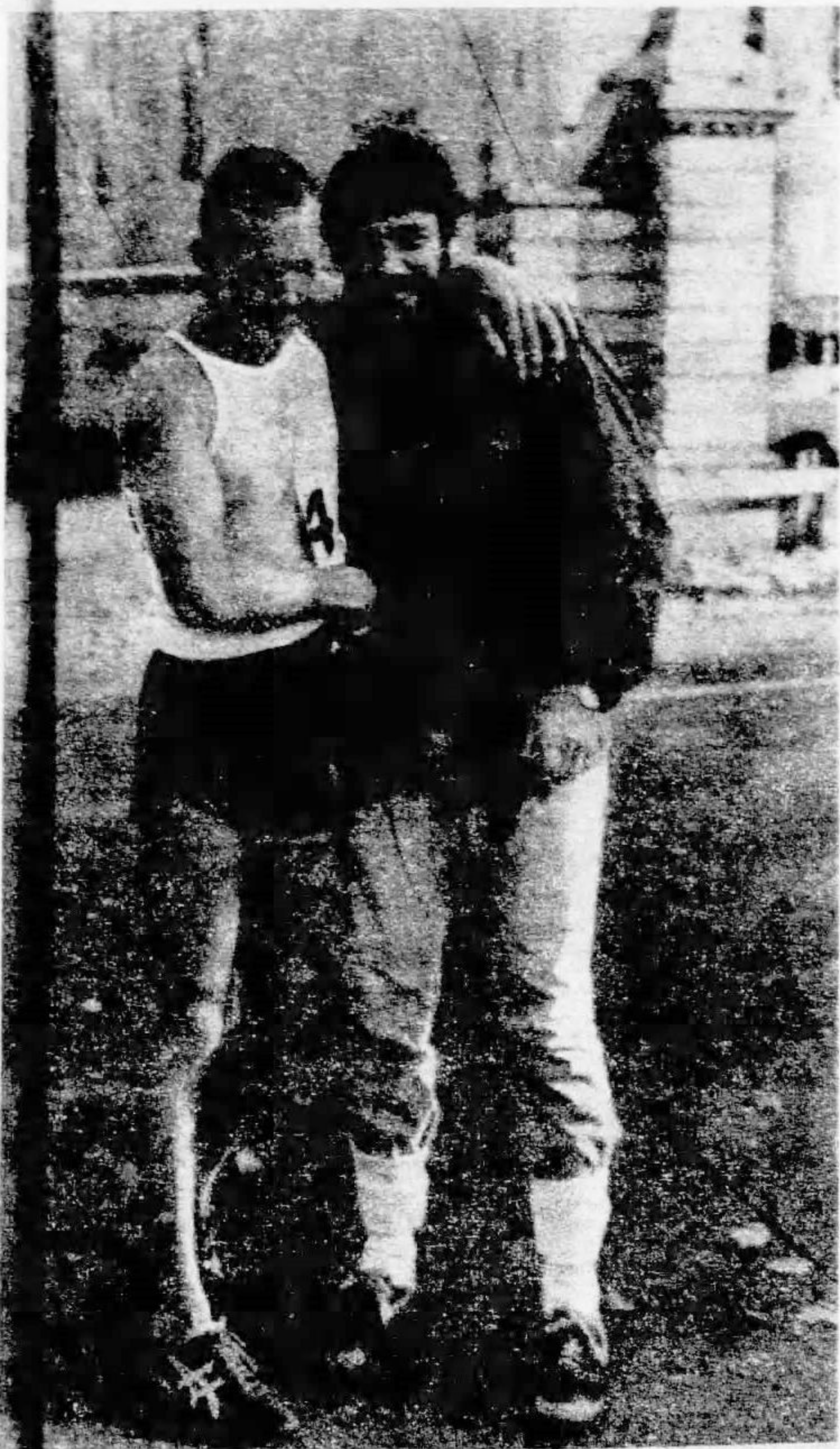
Asked about the difference between marathon and ultramarathon runners, White answered: "I'm not sure. Maybe part of it is physical sturdiness, but it's more mental. It's as if an ultramarathoner has the ability to delay his gratification. It's that middle part of the race which becomes very long in an ultramarathon which just a marathoner is not willing to go through.

"I've never stopped in a race, even when I've had terrible blisters. I try to run through anything I can unless I feel I might permanently damage myself."

Max's weekly average in preparation for long races is around 150 miles, though he has run as much as 220 miles in a week. Such endurance training has paid off. He holds the fastest time for any American in the queen of ultras, the London-to-Brighton 52.7-mile road race where he finished in 5:26:26.

"Anything can happen in such a long, hilly race," one veteran of the run said. "You have to remember when you're tired to make your legs move and to make yourself breathe. You just run through everything."

A former New York City fireman, Gary Muhrcke, took third in the 1976 run. He credits his strong showing to taking as relaxed an attitude as possible about running and racing.



An exhausted Frank Bozanich leans on a friend for support after winning 1976 National AAU 50-Mile Run in New York.

"No matter how many hours you put in," Muhrcke said, "and no matter how much you endure in training, it may not all come together on a given day."

A similar philosophy is expressed by Max White, who asserts that he runs his best races when he's relaxed.

"I try not to get too keyed up beforehand," White said. "I spend the last moments before the start breathing deeply, almost meditating. The last three days are the hardest—a little ache or pain seems amplified. Once I actually start running I just have a sense for the pace that I will be able to hold the whole way.

"Around 30 to 40 miles the complexion of the race changes and you wonder sometimes if you will finish. You know if you stopped you'd tighten up so badly you wouldn't be able to run any more. You have to remind yourself of all the training you've done and that you know you can finish. When the end is approaching you get carried along; it's magnetic and your adrenalin just regenerates. In '74 when I won the Central Park 50-miler, seeing the finish line

up ahead was an unbelievable exhilaration. Later the exhaustion caught up. I felt very much removed from life."

In spite of the stress of racing, ultramarathoners agree that their daily runs are enjoyable and relaxing.

Reactions of friends, family and non-ultra runners vary. One accomplished 50-miler has a wife who thinks it's crazy punishment and won't go to watch. Somewhat baffled parents and girlfriends sometimes show up for races, but six to 10 hours of standing around daunts all but a few. Reactions from other runners range from awe to incomprehension. A familiar comment is: "That's crazy stuff."

Too tough for joggers?

Although joggers who cover one to five miles a day may view such feats as impossibly beyond their range, so too did most ultramarathoners at the start. Cardiovascular and muscular strength and endurance are built up over the years with patient and consistent training.

The real growth of the sport in this

country has taken place mostly since World War II, although a series of similar races were held in the 1880's in New York.

Six-day, (144-hour) go-as-you-please pedestrian competitions took place in the old Madison Square Garden. Contestants logged their miles on circular tracks before large and enthusiastic crowds. Just before the sport's decline in the late 1880's, a world record of 623³/₄ miles was set at the Garden, an average of 104 miles a day!

Women have not yet moved into ultramarathon running to any significant degree. The fastest woman at 50 miles is Eileen Waters of California, who ran a 6:55:27. Another Californian, Penny DeMoss, has run 3:48:27 for 50 kilometers (31 miles).

Ultramarathoning is based on humdrum realities of available time, training, diet, attitude and character. Every runner has a different story and finds a different path from his neighbor. It is an intensely friendly but lonely sport.

"No one else can run it for you," one runner said. "No one." **P**