

## Benita's back, maybe better

Willis returns to form and Albany seeking fourth win

By [PETE IORIZZO](#), Staff writer

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Australia native Benita Willis has been training in Boulder, Colo., the past few weeks as she prepares for the upcoming Freihofer's Run for Women.

The three-time Freihofer's champion has enjoyed it so much that she is applying for a visa and hoping to make the United States her home.

"I've been a little bit of a gypsy," said Willis, formerly Benita Johnson. "I'm looking forward to having my own things, my own place, a car. I'm looking for something stable."

Stability often isn't easy to find in the world of elite road racing, which demands runners follow favorable weather around the world for events and training.

But the past few years were particularly trying for Willis, who suffered a series of injuries and personal setbacks, including the end of her marriage and death of her father.

The 31-year-old is now in better shape and better prepared to challenge for a Freihofer's title than in 2009, when she fell well behind eventual winner Teyba Erkesso about halfway through the 5-kilometer race and finished sixth.

A three-time Olympian pointing toward the 2012 London Games, Willis is looking to regain the form that allowed her to win the Freihofer's in 2006, 2007 and 2008.

"She seems to be in better form than last year," said John Tope, who recruits elite athletes to run in the Freihofer's. "She's feeling a more confident and just working on her speed now."

Willis has become something of a fan favorite at the Freihofer's, in part because of her outgoing personality and involvement in the race's school visitation program, which has led her to speak at several schools around the area.

The Freihofer's also became more personal to Willis in 2008. Not long before she crossed the finish line, her gravely ill father died in Australia; she learned of his death

after the race through phone calls from family members.

"I still remember vividly feeling that he was with me in the last 400 meters," Willis said. "At that stage I didn't know he'd passed away. I checked my phone after the race and had messages galore, telling me the news.

"It was a surreal feeling. The race certainly brings back a lot of memories, but they're certainly good memories. He would have loved seeing me win the race that day."

Willis is coming off a solid performance at the World Cross Country championships, where she placed 17th overall and first among Australians.

Her best distance, though, has been the marathon, which was her event at the 2008 Olympics; she finished 21st among the 82 competitors.

"I think I can win medals and championships in that event," Willis said. "All the short races and training is part of the plan to get myself ready for that."

Willis said she'll reevaluate her career after 2012. But in the meantime, she's hoping to find at least find a comfortable home as a base for her world travels.

"I've been moving around so much that it will be nice to establish home somewhere," she said. "I'm in the process of getting a visa, and that's pretty exciting. I have a lot of great friends here, and I'd like to do more of the road races in America."

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Run the Freihofer's

Register for the race Wednesday or Thursday at Fleet Feet Sports on Wolf Road, or from noon to 8 p.m. on Friday at the CapitalCare Health and Fitness Expo at Empire State Plaza.

At a glance

Freihofer's Run for Women

What: 5-kilometer race through downtown Albany

When: 10 a.m. Saturday

More information: <http://www.freihofersrun.com>