

## A painful victory

Freihofer's champ learns of dad's death after race

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ALBANY -- Benita Johnson raised her arms above her head as she crossed the finish line, an understated celebration for a victory both satisfying and solemn.

Moments after Johnson captured her third consecutive Freihofer's Run for Women title, she received word that her father, Tony Willis, had died. He was 58.

Johnson ran the Freihofer's knowing her father lay unresponsive in an Australian hospital, where she expected a degenerative neurological disease to take his life within days.

"I was running the race for him," she said.

After the race, Johnson planned to rush to his bedside in North Queensland on a Saturday afternoon flight. But during a phone call with a family member, Johnson learned of his death before she even left the finish-line area.

Johnson, 29, became just the third woman to capture three Freihofer's titles. Smiling as she accepted congratulations but turning teary-eyed when talking about her father, Johnson hurried through the post-race formalities to catch a flight home.

Johnson, who recorded a winning time of 15 minutes, 46 seconds, accepted her first-place award at Empire State Plaza and then bolted for Albany International Airport. Her flight was scheduled for 1:30 p.m., just three hours after she paced the field of 3,386 runners.

"This wasn't supposed to be her plan," race director George Regan said.

Indeed, Johnson planned after the Freihofer's to travel from Albany to Europe, where she expected to run a 10k race in June as preparation for the 2008 Olympics. But Johnson received word this past Thursday that her father's condition had worsened.

Plans changed. Thursday night, Freihofer's officials booked Johnson on flights to Australia, where she hoped to be with her father during his last days.

"It's a really unfortunate time for my family," Johnson said. "But I wanted to run the race and be here, to be with the people that support me and love the sport so much. It all reminded me of my dad."

While Johnson grew up in Mackay, Australia, her father introduced her to running. They jogged together along the Australian coast. They ran barefoot through the sand, cooled by ankle-deep ocean water.

Johnson now ranks as one of the world's top road racers. A veteran of two Olympics, she relied as much on strategy as speed to win the Freihofer's.

Battling a stiff breeze that chilled an overcast morning, a group of nine elite runners maintained a cautious pace through the race's early stages. After about 3 kilometers, Johnson and Amane Gobena, of Ethiopia, broke away. They ran shoulder to shoulder through Washington Park.

At the sign marking 4 kilometers, Johnson dashed ahead. She motored down Madison Avenue to beat Gobena by six seconds, crossing the finish line to healthy applause as Eminem's "Lose Yourself" blared from the speakers.

"I got a bit of a cramp in my leg because I had to run so hard that last kilometer," Johnson said.

The win came in convincing fashion, just like Johnson's victory in 2007. She won that Freihofer's by 10 seconds after winning by just two seconds the previous year.

"You can't ask for anything more than what she's done the last three years," said John Tope, who recruits elite runners for the Freihofer's.

After the win, Johnson sent a text message to her coach. She accepted congratulations and met with reporters. She explained her concern for her father and expressed her desire to be by his side.

She described her father, a schoolteacher, as "a lively, happy person who was always full of energy." She said, "He's my hero."

Moments later, Johnson phoned a family member, who relayed the news of her father's death. Race officials said they were uncertain whether Johnson's father died before or after the race. Johnson released a statement asking that her privacy be respected.

Johnson collected herself, then accepted her award at a stage on the plaza and offered a brief speech. Without mentioning her father's death, she thanked race officials and the city of Albany for its hospitality.

"See you next year," Johnson told the crowd. "Maybe I'll bring back some Australian sun and a kangaroo as well."

Johnson then left for the airport, her smile belying a heavy heart.

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