

A Seat in the Bleachers: Sorrow comes in second

By Mike MacAdam

ALBANY — Nobody knew.

And you couldn't tell.

Not even when Benita Johnson was on the stage congratulating

everyone and telling them how

inspirational they all were could you tell that she had just found out that her father was dead.

On a gray day, the last thing she told the crowd at the Freihofer's Run for Women was, "Oh, and I'll see you next year, and, yeah, maybe I'll bring some Australian sun and maybe a few kangaroos, too."

I flashed back to 1996, when I covered the Boston Marathon and Uta Pippig of Germany made an

astonishing comeback to win despite suffering from menstrual cramps and diarrhea. After splashing water on her legs during the race to wash away the indelicacies of her condition, she beamed and blew kisses to the crowd at the finish.

Johnson's burden, of course, was private and psychological. She knew her father was dying, and had made special plans to whisk herself home to see him one last time (if five connecting flights through New York, Los Angeles, Sydney and Brisbane to Mackay, Queensland, can be called "whisking").

The connection between the two performances was how grace, dignity and a sense of humor can still shine through the worst of circumstances.

Johnson's 58-year-old dad, Tony Willis, a schoolteacher who instilled in his future Olympian daughter a love of running by bringing her to the beach to sprint barefoot through the ankle-high water, came down with a neurological disease two years ago that remained a mystery right up to his death.

The last time she saw him was in March, and she did all the talking, because he couldn't do that anymore.

"He was a very happy person, full of energy, really fit," Johnson said. "And he was the sort of teacher at school that all the kids related to, even the kids that got in trouble with the other teachers. He had a lot of time for everyone. He actually even taught me in year 11 and 12, so it's kind of a funny relationship. Yeah, he's my hero."

Only a few people knew what Johnson was going through after getting a phone call Thursday night that her father had been hospitalized and would be lucky to live another week.

In the sometimes cold world of professional sports, the Freihofer's Run was as good a place as any for Johnson to be if she couldn't be with her father. After three short years, she's beloved here.

Still, she said it was difficult to "go forward and have strength."

But you couldn't tell how difficult it was from the way she ran, her face its usual mask of poise and determination. She was light on her feet, and ran a smart, methodical race.

And you couldn't tell how difficult it was from the way she bubbled to the media after winning, at least not until she sprung the fact that she had dedicated the race to her father.

In the minutes after the interviews were over, she got a call that he was dead.

She composed herself, and 30 minutes later, she was on stage. She singled out the elementary school kids that she had spoken to during the week among those from which she drew inspiration and motivation.

"In the future when I'm coming back and I'm 60, maybe some of those kids will be beating me. So I'll have to keep training. Give the kids a clap," she said, her dark eyes shimmering.

For once, a daughter brought her dad to work.