

Benita rings home to report US win and is told her father has died

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Scott Gullan
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BENITA Johnson learnt of the death of her father minutes after dedicating her latest victory to him.

In a tragic turn of events, Johnson received the news when she rang home to tell her family about her third consecutive victory in the Freihofer's 5km road race in Albany, New York, yesterday.

Johnson, after crossing the line in 15min 46sec ahead of a strong contingent of Kenyans and Ethiopians, had spoken about her inspirational father, Tony, who had been a schoolteacher in Mackay.

"This race was for my dad. He's my hero," Johnson said.

"There's four kids in my family.

He lives his life for his kids and for the school and for the kids at the school that I went to.

He was a real family man and well thought of in the community.

"When you have someone like that who's your father, you're always going to come out a pretty good person, so I'm very fortunate to have a dad like that."

Tony Willis, 58, had been battling a serious degenerative illness for some time.

His oldest daughter will return to Australia immediately.

She is expected to remain for a couple of days before heading to Europe to continue her Olympic preparation.

Johnson has emerged from a troubled summer to be in the best form of her career.

After finishing an impressive 11th in the world cross-country championships in April, the 29-year-old has gone from strength to strength.

She won the 10km Great Edinburgh Run in a race record time early last month.

Johnson is scheduled to race over 10,000m in Ostrava, Czech Republic, on June 12, after which she will decide whether to run that event, or the marathon, in Beijing.

While her Olympic stocks continue to rise, those of Commonwealth 400m champion John Steffensen seem to be going the other way.

He finished last in his return to competition yesterday, clocking a disappointing 46.99sec in New York City. American Xavier Carter won in 44.70sec.

It has been a turbulent preparation for Steffensen, who recently changed coaches for the second time this year.

He is now under the guidance of Bobby Kersee, the man who coached Florence "Flo Jo" Griffith Joyner to multiple world sprint records.

Australia did taste some success at the Reebok Grand Prix meeting in the Big Apple with Sarah Jamieson (4min 6.93sec) and Lisa Corrigan going one-two in the 1500m.

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