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Benita to carry family flame

Scott Gullan | June 05, 2008 12:00am

BENITA Johnson knows that when she enters the Olympic stadium in Beijing, he will be there. At the weekend when she raced in a road race in the US, he was there.

Tragically, when she rang home to Australia minutes after crossing the finishing line to send news about another victory, he wasn't there.

Johnson's father Tony Willis had died. He was 58 and had had a degenerative neurological disease for some time.

Yesterday, Australia's distance star placed the race number she wore in the race in his coffin as she said goodbye to her No. 1 fan surrounded by family and friends in Mackay.

"I felt his strength on Saturday even though I didn't know he had passed away until after the race," she said.

"He was with me all the way and I was thinking about him in the last 800m as I was just so determined not to let anyone come past.

"I am always going to have him with me now, which is kind of comforting."

While she had heard her father had taken a turn for the worse before the race, Johnson stayed because she knew that is what he would have wanted her to do.

"I was hoping to come home and say goodbye because I knew it was close," she said.

"He has been sick for a long time and had been getting quite bad quickly ever since the start of this year.

"But he always wanted me to race, always wanted me to do what I wanted to do, especially with the running because that was a big love of his life as well."

Johnson, the Australian 5000m, 10,000m and marathon record-holder, recalled fondly yesterday how it was her father who got her interested in the sport.

"When I started running I used to run along the beach with him in ankle-deep water," she said. "That is why I started enjoying it so much because it was a big passion for him, too. He never raced or anything but he just enjoyed keeping fit and running along the beach.

"We used to do that together and I was a real daddy's girl. I used to love hanging out with him and stuff.

"He lived his life for his kids and mum and when you have a dad like that, you are very close and you miss it all.

"He used to always write on the calendar every time I rang up from Europe. He would write on the calendar where I was racing.

"He would follow it really closely. He was a teacher, very well known in the community, and he would go to school and tell the other teachers what we were up to."

One of the family highlights came at the Commonwealth Games in Melbourne when Tony was present as his other daughter, Caitlin, won the gold medal in the 4 x 400m relay.

He had become sick in 2005, and even to the very end when he was in hospital and unable to communicate, there still wasn't a proper diagnosis.

"All the test results were not consistent with any diagnosis or anything that they knew of," Johnson said.

"He hasn't talked since March, which was hard and obviously not knowing what it was as he got worse was also very hard."

The 29-year-old has endured the toughest six months of her life. The former world cross-country champion has also

had to deal with the breakdown of her marriage and a knee injury.

She will return to her base in London today and continue her Beijing quest, with a decision on whether she runs the 10,000m or marathon to be made in the next two weeks.

"I have drawn a lot of strength from him and from everything that has happened," she said. "I am coming out of it a different person. I'm not unsure of myself any more. I know what I want to do and I am more assertive, which is coming out in my races and training.

"It would have been easy when I got injured and Dad was sick just to drop everything and go, 'Well, it's all too hard', but I am not that sort of person.

"I think that is the strength of my character and I think that is what Dad was like. He would never give up."

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