

Freihofer's Run for Women: Johnson dedicates win to dad

By Mike MacAdam

ALBANY — Slow race, fast exit.

The 30th anniversary Freihofer's 5k Run for Women was a dawdling log jam that whittled its way down to two runners, two-time defending champ Benita Johnson of Australia and Ethiopian Amane Gabena, through two miles.

They were inseparable until the 4k mark, at which point Johnson realized it was time to go, because the Madison Avenue downhill loomed.

She made her move, and maintained the advantage in the sprint to the finish in 15:46, the slowest winning time since 2001.

Then the real running began.

Unbeknownst to all but a few race organizers and her manager, Johnson had made plans to catch a 1:30 p.m. flight home to Australia to visit her dying father, Tony Willis. Shortly after telling the media that she had dedicated the race to him, Johnson got a call from a family member that her father had died.

She recovered her emotions in time to attend the awards ceremony, and graciously congratulated the rest of the runners and promised that the Freihofer's Run would be an important steppingstone toward her return to the Olympic Games in Beijing.

"What I got out of this is the fact that I know that I can win in slow races, but also I know that I can put things that are going on in my life behind me and use it as motivation to go forward and have strength," she said. "It's very easy to come up with excuses of why you might not run well or be down before races. You've got to keep going on with your life."

Willis, a 58-year-old schoolteacher, had suffered from an

undiagnosed neurological disease for the last two years that degenerated in the last six months to the point in March when he could no longer communicate. His condition rapidly worsened this week, leaving Johnson to scramble her travel plans.

Although he was not supposed to live through the week, Johnson expected to see him one more time, and stuck to her plan to run Freihofer's, which included speaking to elementary school students in the Bethlehem and Guilderland school districts, a tradition for elite runners at this race.

"My dad would've wanted me to keep my commitments, and he would've loved to see me speaking at the schools, as well," Johnson said. "That's his big passion, kids."

Johnson won the 2006 Freihofer's through a torrential downpour, then endured hot, humid weather last year, but said the wind on Saturday gave the 2008 race the most difficult condition of the three.

A large clump of runners covered the first mile in 5:14, then runners gradually dropped out of it, leaving Johnson, Gobena and Kane Gakunyi of Kenya strung out on the lead with Genoveva Kigen behind them as they took the sharp right turn onto South Lake Avenue a mile and a half into the race.

Gakunyi fell back as they took another right onto Western Avenue, and Gobena led Johnson by a stride for a stretch up to the two-mile (10:20). She and Johnson were shoulder-to-shoulder shortly after heading back into Washington Park, and Johnson made her race-breaking decision right at the 4k sign.

"Certainly, I sensed the girl I was running with, who's very strong, was a bit tired at 4k, and I knew that the downhill was coming up and if I got a gap on her, I could hold it to the finish, because it's very hard to pass on the downhill section," Johnson said. "That hurt the most out of the three, the last mile."

Gobena held for second in 15:52, Azizza Aliyu got up for third in 16:02, Gakunyi was fourth (16:02) and Millicent Gathoni, who won the Bolder Boulder 10k on Monday, was fifth (16:03).

Johnson is scheduled to run a 10,000-meter race on the track in the Czech Republic on June 12, after which she'll decide whether to stick with that event or run in the marathon at the Olympics. She competed in the 10k in 2004 and the 5k in 2000.

Queensbury graduate Emily McCabe, 24, finished 12th (16:40) after running 16:12 for ninth last year.

A large contingent of Saratoga High runners were in the race for what coach Art Kranick said was a training run, and senior Hannah Davidson posted a 17:08 for 17th place.

Former Bishop Maginn and University at Albany star Alyssa Lotmore of Albany, now running for the Willow Street Athletic Club, was 23rd in 17:37, followed by Davidson's Saratoga High and Kinetic Running Club teammate, Brianne Bellon (17:43).

Joan Benoit Samuelson, 51, the two-time Boston Marathon champ and 1984 Olympic marathon winner, won her age group by finishing 26th in 17:50.

Coming off a strong showing in the masters division at the Boston Marathon, Emily Bryans of Schenectady was 36th in 18:16, followed by 29-year-old Erin Davis of Wilton (18:17), a multiple state champ for Saratoga High.

Top 100

Benita Johnson (29, Australia), 15:46; Amane Gobena (25, Ethiopia), 15:52; Azizza Aliyu (22, Ethiopia), 16:02; Jane Gakunyi (28, Kenya), 16:02; Millicent Gathoni (21, Kenya), 16:03; Florence Jepkosgei (24, Kenya), 16:08; Evelyne Lagat (27, Kenya), 16:11; Genoveva Kigen (28, Kenya), 16:20; Alina Alekseyeva (22, Russia), 16:23; Kathy Butler (Great Britain) 16:31.

Desiree Davila (24, Rochester Hills, Mich.), 16:34; Emily McCabe (24, Durham, N.C.), 16:40; Genet Gebregiorgis (32, Ethiopia), 16:45; Meskerem Legesse (21, Ethiopia), 16:45; Melissa White (27, Rochester Hills, Mich.), 16:46; Jane Kibii (24, Kenya), 17:07; Hannah Davidson (18, Saratoga Springs), 17:08; Dot McMahan (31, Rochester Hills, Mich.), 17:10; Cindy Craine (28, Fort Worth, Texas), 17:28; Paula Wiltse (40, Canada), 17:29.

Yolanda Flamino (31, Rochester Hills, Mich.), 17:31; Mendy Taylor (31, New Paltz), 17:36; Alyssa Lotmore (23, Albany), 17:37; Brianne Bellon (16, Greenfield Center), 17:43; Marisa Hanson (44, Pleasantville), 17:45; Joan Samuelson (51, Freeport, Maine), 17:50; Laurel Park (45, Ann Arbor, Mich.), 17:58; Murphee Hayes (34, Marathon), 17:58; Carmen Ayala-Troncoso (49, Austin, Texas), 18:04; Susan Ashe (22,

Mechanicville), 18:04.

Brina Seguine (18, Rensselaer), 18:07; Sydney King (14, Saratoga Springs), 18:08; Cassandra Goutos (16, Saratoga Springs), 18:12; Madeline Marecki (23, New Canaan, Conn.), 18:14; Jory Waldman (32, Slingerlands), 18:15; Emily Bryans (40, Schenectady), 18:16; Erin Davis (29, Wilton), 18:17; Danielle Winslow (14, Queensbury), 18:32; Elizabeth Paddock (27, Albany), 18:40; Erica Howes (15, Saratoga Springs), 18:41.

Chelsea Trant (16, Niskayuna), 18:43; Zofia Wicciorkowska (45, Poland), 18:45; Morgan Mueller (15, Queensbury), 18:47; Julie LaFrano (25, Loudonville), 18:47; Anne Benson (43, Clifton Park), 18:50; Keelin Hollowood (13, Saratoga Springs), 18:52; Dana Peterson (37, Voorheesville), 19:00; Diane Matthews (26, Albany), 19:05; Charlotte Rizzo (45, Bronxville), 19:09; Amanda Borroughs (14, Wilton), 19:09.

Lori Kingsley (42, Wysox, Pa.), 19:12; Katlin Mock (17, Albany), 19:14; Justine Mosher (23, Queensbury), 19:15; Kari Gathen (39, Albany), 19:18; Shannon Presley (37, Austin, Texas), 19:20; Megan Conway (15, Middle Grove), 19:23; Kelly Dworak (45, Brewerton), 19:26; Karen Dolge (37, Valatie), 19:27; Gabrielle Mancuso (15, New Paltz), 19:30; Anne Gullickson (44, Kingston), 19:32.

Mary Buck (44, Altamont), 19:37; Nora McGrath (33, Ridgefield, Conn.), 19:49; Jessica Snyder (23, Rochester), 19:51; Gretchen Oliver (34, Guilderland), 19:51; Judy Guzzo (41, Niskayuna), 19:54; Heidi Dwyer (27, Troy), 19:54; Katie Dickman (17, Malta), 19:57; Lindsey Eby (18, Clifton Park), 19:57; Amanda Boccio (20, Albany), 19:59; Lucia Rojas (32, Austin, Texas).

Kerry Rodgers (39, Washington, D.C.), 19:59; Mairin O'Connor (18, Scotia), 20:00; Jennifer Amyot (27, Wynantskill), 20:03; Michelle Kroboth (28, Pittsfield, Mass.), 20:06; Jessica Sherry (17, Loudonville), 20:09; Kathryn Bernarde (21,

Latham), 20:11; Melissa Bredice (20, Albany), 20:16; Lea Cure (13, Altamont), 20:19; Ashley Gorr (21, Albany), 20:21; Rachel Keller (14, Loudonville), 20:23.

Meredith Hungerford (12, Saratoga Springs), 20:24; Kaylee Scott (11, Castleton), 20:25; Becky Martin (15, Malta), 20:26;

Rebecca Rosenberg (26, Albany), 20:26; Nancy Briskie (50, Schenectady), 20:28;

Zosia Dunn (16, Loudonville), 20:29; Vanessa Alderman (30, Saratoga Springs), 20:29; Tomi Stern (42, New Paltz), 20:30; Deb Springer (34, Albany), 20:31; Meghan LaPoint (18, Schenectady), 20:32.

Claire Walling (16, Clifton Park), 20:35; Jessica Dunton (25, Lebanon Springs), 20:37; Natana Gordon (16, Loudonville), 20:39; Danielle Marino (14, Saratoga Springs), 20:39; Samantha Legere (17, Scotia), 20:41; Nancy Nicholson (46, Queensbury), 20:41; Emily McTague (17, Niskayuna), 20:41; Sylvie Lloyd (21, Great Britain), 20:41; Shirley Woodford (52, Burdett), 20:42; Katie Hodge (36, Delmar), 20:43.