

Johnson spreads joy around

Freihofer's champion, students enjoy her visits to area schools

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DELMAR -- They inquired about kangaroos and koalas, asked Benita Johnson about places she travels and races she runs.

"Have you ever seen kangaroos in the wild?" one youngster asked. "Or are they walking around the streets?"

"How do you make the Olympics?" another wondered.

Johnson, the Freihofer's Run for Women two-time defending champion, chatted with students at Hamagrael Elementary School on Thursday about topics from her homeland to her Olympic hopes.

The Australia native preached fitness and sportsmanship while fielding questions ranging from, "What do you eat for breakfast?" to "How many races have you won?"

Johnson, who defends her title Saturday at the 30th annual 5-kilometer race through downtown Albany, told the group of about 100 students, "It's not just about winning. It's about doing the best you can."

"This is great because it puts you back in the real world," Johnson said after her hourlong appearance. "It gives you a chance to put something back into the sport."

Elite runners from around the world plan to visit 16 Capital Region schools this year as part of the race's longtime initiative to connect athletes with the area. Freihofer's officials expect more than 4,000 local students to hear the runners speak.

The Freihofer's Run began programs with local schools 15 years ago, when Lynn Jennings gave presentations to students at Empire State Plaza. This year eight runners, including Olympic gold medalist Joan Benoit Samuelson, will visit schools.

Johnson, who also stopped by Guilderland Elementary on Thursday, said few other races afford runners such an opportunity.

"That's one reason I choose to go to this race," Johnson said.

Johnson, 29, invited students to watch her try to earn the Freihofer's \$10,000 prize for the third time. Johnson missed six weeks of training earlier this year with a knee injury, but she said her fitness continues to improve, putting her in position to contend again.

Running a year ago in stifling heat, Johnson finished the 5k in 15 minutes, 22 seconds, just four seconds off the Freihofer's record. But Johnson's strength lies in distance races. She qualified for the 2008 Olympics in the marathon and 10k; she plans to choose one in the next few weeks.

The Beijing Games will mark Johnson's third trip to the Olympics, an achievement that prompted several questions from students. When a student asked if Johnson ever won a medal, she said no, before adding that she expected this year to be her best chance.

After telling stories of her championships and victories, Johnson added, "I haven't won that many races. You don't win a lot. But the good part is, in racing you just want to do your best."

Johnson opened her talk by explaining her harried lifestyle, which sends her across the world. She said she keeps homes in both Australia and London, a midway point between her European and American races.

To compete in the Freihofer's, Johnson flew to Albany earlier this week from Flagstaff, Ariz., where she trained in the mountains. She heads to Europe after Saturday's race and then to Hong Kong to begin her Olympic training.

Meanwhile, Johnson trains by running about 120 miles a week. She runs in the morning and again in the afternoon. She works out in the gym, too.

"I get very tired," Johnson told the students. "I have to sleep a lot during the day, like little babies do."

Johnson said her schedule this weekend leaves no time to tour the Capital Region. But she told students, "I'd love to come back to America sometime as a tourist. I've been to so many beautiful places here."

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