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Johnson takes hat-trick of 5km victories in New York



Benita Johnson wins the 2008 Freihofer's Run for Women (Jeff Foley - www.JeffFoley.com)

Albany, New York - In winning the 30th edition of the Freihofer's Run for Women for the third consecutive time, Australia's Benita Johnson became only the third woman to accomplish that feat in the event's storied history. Lynn Jennings, an eight-time winner, and Marla Runyan are the other two runners to have claimed the feat.

Freihofer's Run for Women which took place on Saturday 31 May is an IAAF Silver Label Road Race.

Johnson, 29, won in a time of 15:46, Amane Gobena (ETH) was runner-up in 15:52 with compatriot Azizza Aliyu winning a very close battle for third in 16:02.

"I didn't have a plan," asserted Johnson. "You never know how the race is going to go. The early pace was very slow. And I got a cramp in my leg (at the end) because I had to run the last kilometre so hard. This win was the one that hurt the most. But I really wanted to win three in a row."

Johnson dedicated the race to her father, who was terminally ill in Australia. She was leaving Albany immediately after the race to return home to be at his side.

"My father is very sick," she said. "He's only got a few days. This race was for my Dad. But I can use things in my life as motivation to go forward and to have strength."

Tragically, moments after finishing the event and calling her family with news of her victory, Johnson learned that her father had died.

The strength that the 2004 World Cross Country champion brought to this race was evident from the outset. Always at the front of the pack, Johnson fronted a large pack through an opening mile of 5:14 with Gobena, Genoveva Kigen (KEN), Jane Gakunyi (KEN), Kathy Butler (GBR), Millicent Gathoni (KEN), Everlyne Lagat (KEN) and a knot of others all holding close.

Approaching two miles, things began to change as Johnson maintained relentless pressure and attrition began to take its toll. The two-mile marker was passed in 10:20, and while Johnson and Gobena raced shoulder to shoulder, daylight had begun to open on the rest of the field. With the contenders reduced to just two, it was clear that it would be only a matter of time before she made her move.

That point came at 4K. Johnson, concerned to avoid a sprint to the finish line, injected an increase in pace that was clearly intended to decide the outcome once and for all. Gobena fought hard to hang on; but Johnson's strength and tenacity, coupled with her knowledge of this hilly course, were insurmountable and, in the closing downhill half mile, allowed her to turn an inch of daylight into a 16- second advantage.

Freihofer's is Johnson's only US race of the season. Following this, her plan was to race a 10,000m on the track in Europe, and then decide if that distance or the marathon will be her focus for the Beijing Olympic Games in August. In Athens in 2004, Johnson placed a disappointing 24th in the 10,000m.

Gobena, 25, held on for an isolated second place, while Azizza Aliyu (ETH), 22, charged through in the closing mile to out-kick the more-favored Gakunyi, a 2004 Olympian at 5000m, and Gathoni, winner of Monday's Bolder Boulder 10k. Aliyu and Gakunyi were both timed at 16:02, with Gathoni at 16:03.

"Though we were saddened by Benita's family tragedy, it's quite plain to see what a tremendous champion and great athlete she is," commented Freihofer's Run for Women Event Director George Regan. "Because of her, and because of the 3,385 women who followed her, this was a great day for Albany."

Edward Parham for the IAAF

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