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World record runner visits Chatham Middle School

Johnson will take part in 5K Saturday

By Sesame Campbell

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Today's Front Page



Benita Johnson, an Olympian and world record holder, works with students at CMH Wednesday. (Sesame Campbell/Hudson-Catskill Newspapers)

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CHATHAM — Olympian and World Record Holder Benita Johnson made a special trip to Chatham Middle School to train and inspire members of the fifth-grade running club and the seventh and eighth-graders in modified track.



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The just-turned 30 Australian distance runner holds seven national records from her home country, and placed first in the 2004 World Cross Country Championships, the 2006 Sanyo Half Marathon, and the Berlin Half Marathon. The last three years, Johnson has won the Freihofer's Run for Women 5K and is hoping for her fourth consecutive win Saturday.

The Freihofer's Run for Women 5K combines some of the top international and American women distance runners and more than 3,500 women from the Capital Region and across the nation. Athletes range from Olympians to recreational runners.

For the young CMS runners, Johnson brought her championship to them in a way that was palpable, and got them to their feet almost immediately.

"I'm going to do something a little different today," Johnson told them. "Instead of standing up here and talking to you for a while, we're going to do some stretching exercises and core exercises together. Then we're going to talk about nutrition and there will be a question and answer period at the end."

Standing in the center of the CMS gym, Johnson was quickly surrounded by laughing, jumping, excited students. However, they were quickly focused with stretching and aerobic exercises that included running in place, leg lifts, crouching and hopping, "butt-kicks" and partnered stretches that use leverage between two people.

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There were also core exercises like “squashing the spider,” a balancing act on one knee with one leg back and one arm forward.

“Training doesn't have to be boring,” she told the participants. “It can be fun. You can be as social as you like. You can train together. It is fun and a good way to keep fit. At your age, it is so important that you're getting some kind of exercise every day.”

Johnson followed up stretches and core exercises with a discussion on proper nutrition, with a list of specific foods that are helpful for sustaining energy.

“Breakfast is the most important meal of the day,” she said. “Even if you don't like breakfast, make sure you give your body something, like a smoothie, or some yogurt, or toast.”

During the question and answer period, students asked a number of questions, including what kind of foods vegetarians should eat. Johnson encouraged students to start somewhere, even if they were having difficulty with some of the training.

“The most important thing to remember is to take little steps,” she said. “Even me — when I get an injury I take little steps to get back into my training regiment. It is the same with these core exercises and training. Take little steps and have fun.”

At the end of the program, Johnson autographed photographs of her crossing the Freihofer's finish line, and handed them to the swarming students.

One young man ran up to a teacher waving his photo. “Benita Johnson autographed it for me,” he yelled. “I got her autograph!”

According to the Freihofer's official Web site, the 31st Annual Freihofer's Run for Women will be held 10:15 a.m. Saturday. The 21st Community Walk will take place earlier that day from 8 a.m. to 9:30 a.m.

Although there is a registration fee for the 5K, there is no cost for organizations or walkers who participate in the community walk and all money raised goes directly to not-for-profit groups.

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