

## Ode to Joy Johnson 1926-2013

One day after finishing her 25th New York City Marathon, Joy Johnson, who had taken a fall during the marathon at 20 miles where she suffered a head injury but continued the race in spite of it, died while taking a nap in her Manhattan hotel room. She was 86 and the oldest finisher of the famed marathon. She was accompanied to the race by her younger sister, Faith [Anderson], 83, who was with her when she died.

“I want to keep running as long as I can and drop in my running shoes when the time comes,” she stated in a 2011 interview with *USA Today*.

The morning after the marathon, she made her annual jaunt to Rockefeller Plaza, where the *Today Show*'s Al Roker interviewed her, as he had done for years as part of the post-NYC Marathon coverage. She wore a bandage on the right side of her head under a scarf; she had told medical personnel at the end of the marathon that she felt fine, but after her interview with Roker, she told Faith that she felt tired and cold, so the sisters returned to their room at the Roosevelt Hotel, where she retired to her room to take a nap. She never woke up and was pronounced dead at Bellevue Hospital in Manhattan. It was not immediately known if the head injury was directly related to her death.

Joy was born on Christmas Day 1926 in frigid Minnesota and was aptly named for her sunny disposition. Friends—and she had armies of friends,



especially within the running universe—were unanimous in their comments about the joy that Joy brought to any occasion. “I’ve met many people in my life,” said Dick Beardsley, whose marathon camp Joy regularly attended, “but none more passionate and full of ‘joy’ as Joy Johnson! Her love of life along with her love of running and being the best she could be in her humble and unassuming way is something I will always cherish!”

“Joy came to Dick’s marathon running camp seven years in a row,” Jan Seeley, the camp director, recalls. “We all wanted to ‘be like Joy’ when we grew up. She was adored by everyone.”

She was tirelessly upbeat and immaculately dressed, with her long gray hair typically tied up in a tight bun, sort of



Sweet memories of Joy Johnson at two of her favorite places on Earth—the ING New York City Marathon and Dick Beardsley’s Marathon Running Camp.

New York City Marathon photos © Larry Sillen. Beardsley camp photos © Michael Lebowitz/Long Run Pictures

school-marmish, which was appropriate. She was a high school phys ed teacher first in Duluth, Minnesota, and later, when she admitted defeat to the cold winters and fled Minnesota, in San Jose, California. She was married for 34 years to Newell Johnson, a widowed internal medicine specialist with four children.

Ironically, although a phys ed teacher, she did not take up regular running until after her retirement at age 56.

She began her running career by taking up walking, then graduated to

running, where she took on longer and longer distances. She began entering races and was eventually persuaded by a friend to run the New York City Marathon. “When I crossed that finish line in Central Park, I just knew this is what I would do the rest of my life,” she told a *San Jose Mercury-News* reporter in 2011. She typically ran three marathons a year. Her personal best came in 1992 when she ran 3:54:39 at Grandma’s Marathon in Duluth; she was 65 at the time.

### *Joy’s friends remember her . . .*

On a cool September morning, with a long ribbon of road laid before us, Joy taught me more about fundamental truths of life, running, and happiness than a half century of living had been able to do.—*Badwater Bill Latter*

Joy showed everyone who knew her how to age fearlessly.—*Darlene Saeva*

Joy was beautiful inside and out. Everyone at Rainbow Resort will miss her.—*Linda Schumann, Rainbow Resort*

Every year at camp, Joy and I had our picture taken together. A few years ago, I received a “postcard” from Joy—a picture of us on race day with a handwritten note on the back. Still makes me JOY-ful to look at it.—*Silvana Dereski*

Joy reminded us that there was so much more to life than the frustrations that we get caught up in every day. Being with her made you stop, take a deep breath, smile, and think, “All I want is to still be running at 80.”—*Kim Lukanic*

Joy truly defined her given name. She gave “joy to the world” in thought, word, and deed.—*Cathy Troisi*

Margie and I went to Joy’s memorial service. As we walked the block to the church, lining the street across from the church were several young women. They were holding signs like we see along a marathon course, as if waiting for Joy to run by. “Run for Joy,” “Joy, you inspire us!” and “Thanks, Joy.” It was a fitting tribute to a life well run.—*Larry McNichols*

Joy lived and loved up to her name!—*Roy Herron*

Joy excelled at aging actively and beautifully.—*Joe Henderson*

Joy was everyone’s hero—we all wanted to be like her.—*Kay Sanborn*

Cherishing Joy’s aging wisdom—accept those things you cannot change, but work real hard on those you can, smiling all the way!—*Janet Cain*

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She regularly attended running camps, including Jeff Galloway's at Lake Tahoe and Dick Beardsley's, which was held during the week after Labor Day in remote Waubun, Minnesota. In 2006 at Dick's camp, she said that her long-term goal was "To keep running until I die and go to heaven."

At the camp, each of the coaches was assigned three to four campers for personal attention. I had the pleasure of "coaching" Joy each year she returned. She would invariably arrive, grab onto my arm, and squeeze it, declaring, "I have my coach." Her goals were always realistic: to bring a 5:50 marathon down to 5:30. And invariably, it came back to the same thing. "You need to get to a track and do some speed work, and

you need to get to some hills to build strength," I would tell her. "But I don't like running at the track," she would declare, "and I don't want to drive to hills just to run. I just want to run." "There are stairs at the track," I would suggest. "Oh, no, I wouldn't like that," she responded. Yet two weeks after camp, an e-mail would arrive. "I've been to the track and I've been to the stairs and I don't like either, but I'm doing it." She seemed to approach everything in life with a beguiling smile, like a perpetual schoolgirl flirting with everything and everyone around her.

Her life revolved around her family and friends, her God, and her running. She will be missed by her family and friends and welcomed home by her God.

—*Rich Benyo*