Living her dream

HELARIA JOHANNES’ JOURNEY TO THE BEIJING OLYMPICS

By Sheena Magenya

Ever since she can remember, Helaria Johannes’ biggest dream was to participate in the Olympics. Watching her first Olympic race, she knew in her heart that running was something that she wanted to do. “I would cheer on Catherine Ndereba from Kenya, and tell myself that one day, that will be me.” Today, as one of the marathon athletes going to represent Namibia in the August Beijing Olympics, Helaria is living her dream.

Born to run

Born twenty seven years ago as the first of seven children, Helaria credits the person she is today to her family. She says that it is very important to have a supportive family that encourages you to do what you want to, and to do it well. She attended Omaseketuna Primary School and moved on to Oshia Combined School in 1997 for her grade seven exams. It was here that she realised her passion for running.

She recalls that the girls would often sit on the sidelines during sports and teachers had to force them to take part. It was during one of these reluctant sports afternoons that Helaria decided to give running a try. She joined the school track team and started running the five hundred metre race, then the three thousand and eventually she tackled the five thousand metre. A naturally gifted runner, Helaria was elated when she was selected to represent Namibia in an inter-school sports challenge in Botswana that same year. She brought home the silver medal.

Resisting social pressure

Helaria went off to high school in Tsumeb. Here, her flame for running was dimmed by social pressure. “People would tell me that if I run I will not get married,” she says. “There were so many more discouraging people than encouraging people. Sometimes it was just jealousy, that you can do something that someone else finds hard, but I still got a bit discouraged. They even told me that if I run, I will not be able to have a child.” For the people around her, marriage and childbearing were considered to be very important aspects of womanhood. Without them, women were seen as ‘incomplete’ and Helaria did not want to be an outcast. For the whole of her grade eleven and twelve, she did not run at all.

After completing high school, Helaria trained as a secretary in Tsumeb, but running remained her secret passion. It took another three years for her to follow her dream. Finally, she packed her bag and left Namibia.

Helaria says that she learned to love running by pushing herself, and by her that she could do it off and on. “I learned the value and tradition of sports, she says, and accomplished the goal that she had set in this regard.

In 2005, Helaria was country representative in the 2007 All Africa Games in Algeria. Her performance in the 3000 metre race stood out to be an excellent record. That year, Helaria trained for a year at the University of Botswana, where she completed sixty kilometres of training a week. A year later, she ran a personal best of thirty-six minutes.

Helaria’s domestic career was short-lived when she would not be able to compete. It was not easy to tell her mother, Mrs Johannes, that Namibia’s top women’s athlete was no more.

At age twenty-nine, Helaria is thirty-five years old, and considering her future, she says, “I still have a long way to go.”
It was her brother-in-law who urged her to follow her dreams. With his encouragement she packed her bags for Windhoek, joined a small running group and began training and racing.

Helaria still faces social pressures today, but has learned to ignore them. Sometimes when she trains, running by the road side, men shout out at her and tell her that she is running away from home. She laughs it off and says that inasmuch as there is still cultural and traditional resistance to women taking part in sports, she runs right past that too! Besides, so many accomplished African female athletes are married and do have children, so she realises she has choices in this regard.

Going global

In 2005 Helaria ran her first ever World Cross Country race in France. Here she shared her living space with some Kenyan marathoners who gave her a hand in designing her training schedule, which turned out to be pivotal in making her more focused in her training. The test of her hard work came the following year at the Two Oceans Marathon in Cape Town, where she took part in the half marathon (twenty-one kilometres). With a time of one hour, thirteen minutes and thirty-five seconds, Helaria took home the gold. A year later she returned to the Two Oceans, beat her own time and set the women’s record for the course.

The ultimate challenge

Helaria realised in 2007 that the crux of her running career would be to take part in the Olympics. Nothing would make her prouder. “The Olympics are a big deal! It is one of those events that I want to be able to tell my children, ‘Look! That was me representing Namibia!’”

At a race in Dublin, Ireland, she easily qualified for the Olympics with a marathon time of two hours, thirty-three minutes and thirty seconds. Unfortunately, this race was not taken into consideration and she had to run another marathon in order to qualify. Undeterred, Helaria took part in the Seoul Marathon in March 2008 and qualified with a time of two hours, thirty-three minutes and six seconds, breaking her own Namibian record and setting a new one. Helaria had finally made it to the Olympics!

Running mind, body and soul

Asked what goes through her mind when she is running a race, Helaria says, “When you’re running, you’re running. You have to be focused on what you are doing. You know what you left home to do, and if it is to run, then all you should do is run.” She strongly believes that body and mind are inextricably connected, and that winning is all in the mind. “If you are not strong in your mind, even if you are fit, then really you are not fit at all.”

She uses the few moments at the starting line to strengthen herself mentally, “This is the time you put the bullet in your gun.” She explains that during every race, getting past the halfway point is always the defining moment. “It is at that point where you decide whether you are winning this race, or losing it. You know you trained for this and so you just have to focus and go for it.”

Aside from sheer determination and the iron will to win, Helaria says that hard work and self-confidence play a huge role in influencing her performance. “Having the ability to believe in yourself and your strengths - even when no one else does - is what will drive you and push you towards living your dream,” she smiles. “You just have to know what you are doing. No matter what people tell you - and people will say negative things - the only way to keep them quiet is to keep doing what you believe in, and doing it well.”

Helaria encourages young women and girls to take up sports, any kind of sports, because they keep you focused. “When you have a training schedule that you follow strictly, you do not have enough time to go to parties and to the shebeens and even if you did have the time, you would be too tired to even leave your bed!”

She attributes running to giving her the focus that has brought her so far. She is going places and doing things she only ever dreamed possible, travelling the world and living the life she’s always wanted. When asked what’s next after the Olympics, Helaria smiles a knowing smile and says “That’s my secret! Watch this space!” I suggest you do just that.