

Former Olympic downhill champ Bill Johnson dies at 55



In this Feb. 16, 1984, photo, Bill Johnson smiles after he won the gold medal in men's downhill at the Winter Olympics on Mt. Bjelansnica near Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina.
Photo/AP

By Eric Willemsen, AP

Bill Johnson, the brash American who became the first U.S. skier to win an Olympic downhill title, died after a long illness, the U.S. ski team said Friday. He was 55.

Megan Harrod, a spokeswoman for the U.S. Alpine team, said Johnson died Thursday at an assisted living facility in Gresham, Ore.

Johnson's health had been on the decline for several years

after a series of strokes.

Johnson won the downhill at the 1984 Sarajevo Olympics, the first American to capture gold in Alpine skiing's marquee event. He was also the first American male to win an Olympic gold in any Alpine event.

He became an iconic figure to many Americans by predicting he would win Olympic gold.

"They related to Billy – that brash, throw-it-in-your-face type attitude," Phil Mahre, who won the Olympic slalom in 1984, said in 2012. "When you tell people you're going to go do something and then you go out and back it up like in Sarajevo, it's pretty impressive."

Johnson tried to make a comeback ahead of the 2002 Salt Lake City Olympics at the age of 40, but crashed in a downhill training run in 2001 at the U.S. championships at the Big Mountain near Whitefish, Mont. He sustained a traumatic brain injury that erased nearly a decade of memories. He had to learn how to walk, talk and eat again.

Johnson made steady improvement over the years, even returning to the slopes for recreation. But his health deteriorated again because of strokes, and he spent his last years in the assisted living center near Portland.

"Bill was an unbelievable fighter since his injury. He went through a lot. It's sad," Olympic super-G silver medalist Andrew Weibrecht said Friday. "He was the guy that really jump-started American downhill racing. Nothing had really happened much up until '84 when Bill came and had that fantastic run in Sarajevo and that same year he won Wengen.

"He really paved the way for guys like Tommy Moe, A.J. Kitt and Kyle Rasmussen to realize that it's possible. In turn these guys paved the way for our generation," Weibrecht said after finishing second in a World Cup super-G in Kitzbuehel.

Weibrecht's teammate Steven Nyman also paid tribute to Johnson.

"He didn't care what anyone said, he did it his way. And he did really good," Nyman said. "There was a couple of years where he was really good and he kind of paved the way for us. For some reason, Americans have done well in Olympic downhills, with him, Bode (Miller) and Tommy Moe. Hopefully I can follow in his tracks."

Nyman, who met Johnson a few times, recalled how he and teammate Marco Sullivan sent Johnson a short video to congratulate him on his birthday last spring.

"He sent us a message back and really appreciated it. It meant something," Nyman said.

"It's really sad," Lindsey Vonn, winner of the 2010 women's Olympic downhill title, said Friday. "He's had a rough couple of years and it's been sad to watch him deteriorate like that. But you know when you're in a state like that I think it's a blessing sometimes. He was an incredible legend in our sport so I just hope he rests in peace and my condolences to his family."

Johnson, who was born in Los Angeles, grew up racing at Bogus Basin, Idaho, and Mt. Hood, Ore.

Caught stealing cars as a teenager, the judge gave him a choice: Attend ski school or head to jail. So he went to Mission Ridge Ski Academy in Washington, where he developed his talent.

Johnson established himself on the global scene when he won the Lauberhorn downhill in Wengen, Switzerland, in 1984 in his second year on the World Cup circuit.

A month later, Johnson went to Sarajevo and cockily predicted that he would win, annoying his European rivals. He came

through, beating silver medalist Peter Mueller of Switzerland by 0.27 seconds.

“What he did that day was amazing at the time,” said Bill Marolt, former president and CEO of the U.S. Ski and Snowboard Association. “In retrospect, it’s still amazing.”

Johnson won twice more on the World Cup circuit in 1984 in Aspen and Whistler, but never stepped on the podium again. He went through knee and back injuries that curtailed his career and prevented him from defending his title at the 1988 Calgary Olympics.

“He was just a legend,” American speed racer Travis Ganong said. “He used to be a pioneer for American downhill skiing. ... He was an amazing skier and was a legend of the sport. He will be dearly missed for sure.”

Vonn and Tommy Moe are the only other American skiers to win Olympic gold in downhill.

Vonn, who was competing in downhill training Friday ahead of a World Cup race in Cortina d’Ampezzo, Italy, said Johnson was a trailblazer for American downhillers.

“He was definitely a pioneer – first American to win an Olympic downhill gold medal,” Vonn said. “So for sure, an inspiration and for Americans definitely a legend in the sport.”

AP sports writer Andrew Dampf in Cortina d’Ampezzo, Italy, contributed to this report.