

A stroke slowed olympic legend michael johnson, but F.A.S.T. response sped his recovery

May 1 2019

There he was, Michael Johnson, once the fastest person ever to run 200 meters, the man who'd been so confident of setting the world record that he stepped onto the Centennial Olympic Stadium track wearing spikes painted gold.

Only now he was wearing a powder-blue patient's gown and leaning into a walker. He'd just finished a lap around the fourth floor of UCLA Medical Center. It was the start of his recovery from a stroke. When he reached the finish line of his bed, his internal tape measure read 200 meters.

On that memorable night in Atlanta in 1996, he covered the distance in 19.32 seconds. This afternoon in 2018 in Santa Monica, he needed about 10 minutes.

Devastating, right?

Not to Johnson.

At this moment, he knows things can only get better. And the only way to find out is by pushing his body to its limit. The challenge feels familiar.

"I'll make a full recovery," he tells his wife, "and I'll do it faster than

anyone."

Eight months later, only Johnson can detect the differences in his stride pre-stroke and post-stroke. Sure, his recovery was boosted by having the body and mindset of an elite athlete. But doctors also credit the fact he sought help as soon as the symptoms hit.

So this May—American Stroke Month—Johnson is helping spread the word about recognizing the warning signs of stroke. He's the perfect pitchman for the acronym long used in stroke symptom awareness because it's a word he knows as well as anyone: F.A.S.T.

It stands for face drooping, arm weakness, speech difficulty, time to call 911.

Johnson's saga began Aug. 31, a few weeks before his 51st birthday. He finished a 45-minute workout in his home gym, then went outside to chat with his wife.

Turning to walk back in, he stumbled. His left ankle didn't flex.

He hobbled to a weight bench, sat and pondered what might've gone wrong. Before pinpointing anything, his left arm tingled. Then twitched.

Taken to UCLA Medical Center, he underwent a brain scan. It came out clear, meaning the hunt for a cause continued.

He went for an MRI and fell asleep inside the tube. When it was time to get up, he couldn't.

The MRI showed that a stroke caused by a blood clot had come and gone. Like a tornado, it left a swath of destruction among the blood vessels on the right side of his brain, thus affecting his left side.

Stroke is the No. 2 killer worldwide. In the United States, it's No. 5, but a leading cause of adult disability. While the disease often afflicts people who are older or frail, it also attacks those who are younger—even those who are extremely healthy. African American men are especially at risk.

The stroke only affected Johnson's movement. His thinking remained sharp.

He spent the next two days wondering if he'd recover. He also thought back to being 18 and wanting to get the most out of his ability, whatever that might be.

Although he never even won a state championship in high school, Johnson blossomed into the rare sprinter to win gold at three consecutive Olympics. He became the fastest ever at 200 and 400 meters, setting both records at the 1996 Olympics. No man had ever swept those events. Defending his 400-meter gold became another first. When experts rank greatest Olympians, he's part of the conversation.

Now he again wanted to get the most out of his ability, whatever that might be.

His physical therapist insisted on setting a baseline using a walker.

As slowly as they went, Johnson got faster along the way—as he implemented "coaching" from his therapist.

The improvements were incremental, but this is a guy who once "shattered" a [world record](#) by 34-hundredths of a second.

So when Johnson got back to his room and declared that he would make a full, fast recovery, he wasn't merely spouting positivity.

"It's going to come down to hard work and focus," he told his wife. "I know how to do that."

The next day, Johnson walked to the elevator and rode down to the physical therapy clinic. The day after that, he took the stairs.

At six weeks, his wife no longer detected a limp. Around four months, Johnson considered his gait smooth.

Johnson tweeted about his stroke soon after it happened. He continues talking about it because he realizes he can make a difference.

"Being a [stroke](#) survivor is now part of who I am," he said. "I want people to understand it can happen to anyone and that there are ways to minimize their risk."

American Heart Association News covers heart and brain health. Not all views expressed in this story reflect the official position of the American Heart Association. Copyright is owned or held by the American Heart Association, Inc., and all rights are reserved. If you have questions or comments about this story, please email editor@heart.org.

Citation: A stroke slowed olympic legend michael johnson, but F.A.S.T. response sped his recovery (2019, May 1) retrieved 8 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2019-05-olympic-legend-michael-johnson-fast.html>

| |
|--|
| <p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p> |
|--|