

Track: Herbert earns first South African medal

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Earlier, she had difficulty carrying the flags around the track because she was drained from her race.

"I felt just strong enough to hold the two flags," she said.

She didn't have any intention of letting them go, however, summoning all her strength to walk slowly instead of jogging, as gold medalists usually do, but with only one flag.

Freeman, running out of the unfavorable lane one, held off a late charge from her training partner of the past three weeks, Sandie Richards of Jamaica, and won in 49.77 seconds. Richards was second in a career-best 49.79.

Richards is well aware of Freeman's political battle.

"She's from Australia and they don't look up to Aboriginals," Richards said. "There are a lot of prejudices against Cathy Freeman. She's trying to rise above them."

"They're nominating people to carry the flag in 2000 (at the Sydney Olympics) and some people are questioning why she should be nominated, why does she shave her head to get attention and why she hasn't won any big races."

The two held each other before the race, and Richards told her "she could do it even though I was in the race. I told her we could be 1-2."

Freeman, the first Aboriginal to represent Australia in the Olympics, won the silver medal last year, finishing behind Marie-Jose Percec of France.

Percec, who also won the 200 at the Atlanta Games, did not defend her world title, and is competing in only the 200 at the championships.

The only other Australian to win a world title was Rob de Castella, the 1983 marathon champion.

Johnson, whose 58-meet winning streak in the 400 was broken in June, rebounded from his near failure in the heats at the championships by winning his semifinal in 44.37, the year's fourth-fastest time.

With Johnson awarded a wild card as defending champion, the United States was permitted to have three other entrants in the 400. The three — Antonio Pettigrew, Tyree Washington and

Jerome Young — all reached the final, with Washington taking the other semifinal in 44.61.

The rest of the final field will consist of Britons Mark Richardson, Jamie Baulch and Iwan Thomas, along with Ugandan Davis Komaga.

Herbert was beaten for the hurdles title by France's Stephane Diagana, who, after crossing the finish in a 1997 world-best in 47.70, collapsed onto the track.

Herbert was timed in 47.86, a South African record. American Bryan Bronson, the previous world leader and heavy favorite after Olympic gold medalist Derrick Adkins was eliminated in the semifinals, faded after a fast start and finished third at 47.88.

After Diagana was helped up,

he took a victory lap, and Herbert joined him, carrying the South African flag. Herbert foresees a bright future for himself.

"From now on, it's just going up and becoming the Edwin Moses of South Africa," he said.

In Monday's other finals, Sarka Kasparkova of the Czech Republic won the women's triple jump with a world-leading 49 feet, 10 1/2 inches, and Germany's Sabine Braun, the 1991 heptathlon champion, regained the title with 6,739 points.

Kasparkova's leap was the third-best ever and made her the No. 2 all-time performer, behind Ukraine's Inessa Kravets. Romania's Rodica Mateescu, the runner-up, had the fifth-best performance in history at 49-9.

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