

Cathy Freeman is the first to admit she lost her way when her sporting career came to an end – but the Olympian is now happier and busier than ever, with TV work, a children's book and a diploma. And her love-life is back on track, too. By Tim Elliott.

When Cathy Freeman crossed the finish line in the final of the 400 metres at the 2000 Sydney Olympics, she was travelling at about 30 kilometres per hour, which is 10 times faster than she's going right now. We're bumper-to-bumper in Melbourne's peak-hour traffic, inching along Collins Street in a snow-white limo, Freeman's lissom frame enfolded in the plush bucket seats, the delicate leather upholstery wheezing beneath our bottoms. She drums her fingers on her thigh, sighing now and then, her chest rising as if she's stashing oxygen before a big race. She's nervous despite, or maybe because of, the fact that she's literally dripping with diamonds – \$25,000 worth, to be precise. She's wearing a set of matching rings and earrings from jeweller Georg Jensen and has recently been named the brand's "ambassador".

"I wonder if I get to keep them?" she muses, staring at the diamonds. "I never ask for anything but..."

Being a Georg Jensen brand ambassador means showing up at gigs like the one we're headed to now – an A-lister launch of the Danish jeweller's Master Diamond Collection. Hobnobbing, however, is not Freeman's favourite activity. She is, by her own admission, extremely shy. As her agent, IMG's Nicole Adamson, puts it, "Cathy has to step out of her comfort zone to do these functions. She really has to challenge herself to get into the public eye."

Sure enough, the closer we get to the event, the more anxious Freeman becomes. She grips the door handle, squints out the window, slips into extended silences. By the time the driver eases into the gutter,

pulling up before a knot of jostling photographers, she sounds positively stricken. "Oh God," she says.

Bracing herself, she swings her boot-clad legs out of the car and steps into the blaze of popping flashbulbs. She pulls a girl-next-door-type pose, head tilted on her shoulder. She smiles meekly but it's not entirely convincing. Fake smiles are not her forte. She's much better at the real thing.

Once one of the fastest women on the planet – and still a sporting icon and symbol of Aboriginal reconciliation – Cathy Freeman, 32, is undergoing a rebirth, starting with her name. It's not Cathy but Catherine, she says. "Catherine has always been my name – the name my friends and family call me. It was just that the public called me Cathy, probably because it was easier."

As with most elite athletes, her second life began in the months following her retirement, in July 2003. "When I retired, I felt lost; it was like I was free-falling. I lost my feet and I didn't feel solid within myself."

Running had defined Freeman's life from an early age. Born in 1973 in Mackay, Queensland, she ran (and won) her first race at the age of eight, an 80-metre barefoot dash that she took part in only at the insistence of her teacher. Her stepfather, Bruce Barber, coached her through primary school, sending off for training manuals; a railway guard, he used his concession card to take Freeman to interstate championships. By her teens, it started to pay off. At the age of 16, she won gold in the 4 x 100-metre relay at the 1990 Commonwealth Games in Auckland, before going on to Barcelona in 1992, where she →

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