



She's a bizarre mix of shyness and self-confidence. She honestly believes she can do anything...



Schoolgirl Cathy Freeman won her first race at age eight.

became the first Aboriginal track-and-field athlete to represent Australia at an Olympic Games. In 1994, she won the 200 metres and 400 metres at the Commonwealth Games in Victoria, Canada (sparking a row by draping herself in the Aboriginal and Australian flags), then became the first Aborigine to win an individual Olympic gold medal – fittingly, in Sydney in 2000.

It was a luminous career but it came at a cost. Her entire adult life had been spent in the embrace of trainers and dieticians, physios and sports psychologists. "Everybody always telling me what to do, what to eat and what to drink, when to go to bed and when to wake up."

Leaving this "very small world", as she calls it, has been like stepping, blinking and disorientated, from a darkened room into bright sunshine. "I used to feel so strong and invincible in my sport, being the best, and then, suddenly, all I was the best at was not knowing." She found herself becoming "envious of anyone who knew what their place in the world was".

"She was often depressed," says friend Madge Fletcher, who met Freeman in 2000, when Fletcher worked at the Sydney Organising Committee for the Olympic Games (SOCOG). "She often didn't know what to do with herself, even on a day-to-day basis. Just after she retired, she rang me from Ireland, saying, 'Oh my God, my life – what am I doing?'"

Getting back on track has been a rocky road. Following her retirement, some people talked about a career in politics; others mentioned the media. But an early foray into commentating, for the BBC at the world athletics championships in Edmonton, Canada, in 2001, ended disastrously when she was sacked after one session, reportedly because she

had little to say and no insights to offer. Part of the problem was what she calls her "scattiness" and a tendency to be "under-prepared". Although her talent and courage have never been questioned (she once threw herself over the finish line in a national final, hitting the ground so heavily she had to be taken to hospital), tales of her vagueness abound. Raelene Boyle, who coached Freeman in 1991, gave up after "Cathy kept arriving three-quarters of an hour late, claiming she'd been shopping or had her hair done."

Her personal life seemed equally adrift, a series of intense relationships followed by increasingly public break-ups. Her 1996 split with manager and partner Nick Bideau resulted in legal action over endorsement earnings. "Unfortunately, what I had with Nick was a personal slash professional arrangement," says Freeman. "And because there was no separation between the responsibilities, that made the whole thing very messy." After her three-year marriage to Nike executive Sandy Bodecker ended in February 2003, she started seeing actor Joel Edgerton but that also finished badly when the couple parted in January.

Now, however, Freeman is back together with Edgerton and couldn't be happier, something that is perhaps also due to her being incredibly busy. Down time doesn't seem to suit her. Apart from studying for a graduate diploma in counselling of elite performers at Victoria University, she's working on a kids' book with Penguin. She's also involved in a couple of TV projects, the first being a co-hosting role with Deborah Mailman in a travel show called *Going Bush*. Produced by Lonely Planet Television, the four-part series will be shot in the Kimberleys in July and screened on SBS early next year. She's also helping to produce a one-hour documentary

about herself, to be screened on the ABC, with producer Kimba Thompson and close friend Lou Glover. "It's Freeman's story, told through her, her family and friends," says Glover.

Glover believes Freeman's power derives in part from being "the only person to have united this nation, if only for a moment". Despite having retired two years ago, the Olympian's fan mail keeps rolling in – 50 letters a month from every corner of the world. "For some reason, we get a lot from Germany," says her agent Nicole Adamson. "It's amazing."

Every day sees another two or three requests for assistance or fundraising: an invitation from the Fiji Sports Council to attend their sports day, an overseas call asking if Freeman would open an athletics centre in London...

Freeman does as much as she can – in May, she helped raise \$66,000 for the Manila-based Springboard-Foundation, a charity for street kids in the Philippines. But she increasingly has her hands full. Apart from her work for Inspire, an Australian suicide prevention charity, and Cottage by the Sea, a respite centre for kids from disadvantaged backgrounds, there are speaking engagements and staff incentive programs for her regular sponsors, which include Nike, Qantas, Australia Post and Mitre 10. In 2003, she signed on with pharmaceutical company AstraZeneca, which runs educational programs for young asthmatics – appropriate, given that Freeman suffers from exercise-induced asthma. She's also an ambassador for Aboriginal Tourism Australia and has been named as "the face" of the 2006 Commonwealth Games in Melbourne.

Freeman is a brand, then, and a potent one at that. Because of her profile and squeaky-clean