



From left: Freeman with former husband Sandy Bodecker in 2000; with boyfriend Joel Edgerton in November 2003; winning gold in 2002 with Lauren Hewitt (left) and Jana Pittman (centre).

image, she is regularly approached by organisations and companies keen to get her on board. "I have people coming to me constantly," she says, "corporate groups, individuals; the thing is to educate myself so I know how to make the most of those opportunities, how to make the most of the power that is Cathy Freeman."

Some of the groups that approach her share her values; others don't. "Sometimes I feel quite protective of her," says Glover. "She has the innocence of a child and I'm wary of people trying to take advantage of that." Adamson agrees. "Catherine has a huge heart and is a real people-pleaser. She finds it difficult to say no."

Glover tells the story of sitting in on a meeting with an executive from a large food distribution company in London in early 2005. "This guy was trying to get Freeman involved in his company so he was trowelling on the charm and he knew all the right buttons to push regarding the indigenous issues; you know, he was talking big about the importance of family and community. But something didn't add up. He was all sweetness and light with Freeman, then in the next breath, he'd turn around and be totally disrespectful to the waiters." Alarm bells went off in Glover's head; after leaving the meeting, she told Freeman she thought the businessman was a "shonk". Did Freeman listen? "Kind of," says Glover. Despite her legendary wattiness, Freeman can also be, according to Glover, "incredibly strong-willed".

"That's the strangest thing about her," adds Madge Fletcher. "She's the most bizarre mix of shyness and self-confidence. She honestly believes she can do anything, that she can change the world by doing good for people but then she'll defer to me

on the smallest decisions. We'll be having lunch and you'll ask her what she wants to drink and she'll say, 'Um, well, what do you want to drink?' and I'll say, 'No, Cath, what do you want to drink?'"

While the key to Freeman's appeal lies in her unpretentiousness (Melbourne 2006 Commonwealth Games chairman Ron Walker says she's still the same "lovely young Australian that I remember before she gained international fame"), she can also be dangerously unguarded, with a lack of guile that can make her seem momentarily naked. Asked by a journalist in 2004 whether she had thought long and hard about retiring, she responded, "I don't think I've ever thought long and hard about anything."

And despite her achievements, she remains self-deprecating. "Just after she won the gold medal in Sydney, she came into the store to buy some jewellery," says Anne Sullivan, Georg Jensen's director of operations. "She was interested in a pair of earrings that had holes in them. Cathy pointed at the holes and said, 'Hey, look, it's just like my head! Lets the air through quicker.'"

All through the publicity shoot for the company's catalogue, Sullivan says, Freeman kept asking, "But why did you choose *me*?"

If you run fast enough, you never know where you'll end up. Freeman was raised in a crowded house, in Mackay, with three brothers and an elder sister, Anne-Marie, who suffered from cerebral palsy. (Anne-Marie died in 1990 and Freeman still cites her as her greatest inspiration.) The one-time Olympic gold medallist, who used to run barefoot, now lives in a modern three-storey, five-bedroom house in Melbourne's Kew. "It's too big for one girl," she

admits, shrugging. There's a French antique dining table, high-backed chairs covered in fleur-de-lis and Chinese lanterns on the wall. The halls are covered in Aboriginal artwork, while a solid-wood pelican sculpture stands sentinel by the doorway. When I ask her about it, she says, "It's from the Tiwi Islands, I think." Then, "It's Aboriginal, that's all I know."

At the Georg Jensen event, she's the only black person in a room crammed with some \$2 million worth of brilliant-cut diamonds. From the minute she enters, she is mobbed by admirers, society women, preening A-listers, bon vivants in paisley cravats. At one point, Melbourne socialite Lillian Frank approaches from across the room, arms spread wide. "Daaaaarlnnnk!" says Frank, slapping Freeman on the bottom. "You look goooorgeous!" She grabs Freeman's chin and waggles it from side to side. "Listen to me, you must come out of your shyness and bloom, bloom like a flower! A flower, I tell you!"

We hang around the party for another hour or so, Freeman constantly approached by photographers to pose in photos with people she's never met. "My life is so different now," she says. "But it's great. I'm loving every minute of it. I can do things that most people take for granted; fun things, normal things like rollerblading. The other day, I went parachuting; I would never have had time for that before."

But at heart she remains a runner. "I ran this morning, 45 minutes," she says. "I feel happier when I'm running. I love using my legs. I love feeling the energy under my feet and at the end of my toes. I love feeling my heartbeat and doing what my body is capable of." But, she adds, "I don't feel the urge to go out and win medals again. I've moved on." ●