

RUNNING free

49.11 seconds
may not seem
like much time,
but it is long
enough to make
history

When you were growing up, was it difficult to train as a serious athlete as well as going to school?

As a child, through school, I didn't find it too difficult. Looking back, my passion was always running, and it far outweighed other things in life. My running helped me learn to be sensible and happy. I knew those who helped and guided me realized that I had the potential to be a champion, and thankfully I proved them right. I always enjoyed strong support and encouragement through my school years.

Did you ever imagine you could win an Olympic gold?

Absolutely! At ten, my dream was to win an Olympic gold medal. I would pretend that I was receiving my medal on the dais. I would imagine winning so vividly that I'd even cry, just dreaming what it'd be like. Thankfully, my dream came true.

How do you feel about being one of only two Aboriginal athletes to win a gold medal at the Olympic Games?

I feel very special, honoured and happy. I am very proud indeed. My indigenous heritage enhances my sense of fulfilment and joy!

Australia awarded you the title of Young Australian of the Year in 1990 and Australian of the Year in 1998. Now you are going to be the face of the next Commonwealth Games, to be held in Melbourne in 2006. How do you feel about being such an Australian icon?

When **cathy freeman** sprinted across the finishing line of the 400 metres on 22 September 2000, to the tumultuous cheers of a jubilant home crowd, she became one of the most significant Olympians of modern times. In less than a minute, 31-year-old Freeman had become the first Australian Aborigine to win an Olympic track and field gold medal – her compatriot Nova Peris-Kneebone had, four years earlier, won a gold in Atlanta as part of Australia's victorious women's hockey team.

Running her victory lap, Freeman showed her patriotism and her cultural pride, draping both the Australian and the Aboriginal flags over her shoulders. For many of her indigenous and non-indigenous fellow citizens alike, this demonstration of national unity and reconciliation was to become the defining image of the Sydney Olympics.

Freeman had already achieved a first in 1992 in Barcelona when she became the first Aborigine to represent Australia at the Olympics. In 1996 at the Atlanta games she earned silver, before crowning her career with gold in Sydney – the most environmentally friendly of all Olympiads.

Cathy Freeman announced her retirement from competitive athletics in July 2003. But she continues to make an important impact on the international scene, working for sport, for the environment and for young people.

I am only just feeling comfortable about accepting such a status and being an icon here in Australia. It makes me feel a little scared and overwhelmed, but it makes me feel proud too!

Which major environmental issues are you particularly interested in, and why?

They include waste management, tree and grass planting, corporate, political and social support for environmental causes, and most importantly community awareness. Preserving the environment is essentially about taking care of ourselves and our future!

You are an ambassador for the Mitre 10 Landcare 'Caring for our Waterways' initiative, which supports local water projects across Australia. What motivates you to undertake the environmental work that you are currently involved in?

My interest and passion is fuelled particularly by my undying love of nature and significant interest in giving ourselves, as human beings, the greatest opportunity of being the very best that we can be. We owe it to ourselves to make our dwelling place the most beautiful home possible. 'You are what you see' – I am a strong believer in this adage. Besides, I have way too much respect for life to not care.

Do you feel that we could all learn something from the close relationship that Aboriginal people share with the natural world?

Absolutely! For thousands and thousands of years my people, the Australian indigenous community, have maintained a traditional love and respect for the environment, rejoicing and celebrating the earth through all times. Aboriginal people enjoy a spiritual connectivity to the land that also fosters a real respect and love for Mother Nature.

You have been working for many years with Inspire, an organization that supports and empowers young people. Can you tell us about it?

Basically, Inspire focuses on the issue of teenage suicide in rural areas. Using internet technology, Inspire ensures greater opportunities for youth to address their personal issues confidentially and appropriately. I am patron of Inspire, and am very proud of the work that's going on, and the difference that Inspire is making in young people's lives throughout Australia. I am so pleased to be a part of such a wonderful organization that helps breathe new life into our greatest resource – young people. Inspire reminds me that the future is always a bright one!

Now that you have retired from running, what do you plan to do in the future?

I just hope to keep on trying to be the person that I really want to be, by remaining true to myself and to the values that I cherish. If I can make a difference, that would be wonderful. Absolutely wonderful!



photo: Empics

Let's pay fair!

If you want to help indigenous peoples, why not support them by purchasing their crafts, foods and other products through a fair trade organization? Companies committed to fair trade try to return between a quarter and a third of the price we pay for items to the person who produced them. Although some might complain that fair trade products cost slightly more money than non-fair trade items, many believe that this is a small price to pay for improving the lives of workers struggling against poverty.

Most fair trade organizations buy crops, produce and handicrafts directly from small farmers and artisans. This added income can help people in the poorest countries enormously by cushioning their fortunes against volatile fluctuations in world market prices. Thus, with their livelihoods more secure, they can afford to feed, clothe and shelter their families, as well as invest a portion of their earnings back into growing their businesses further.



Bushman jewellery

photo: www.survival-international.org

Popular indigenous products include:

- Pine-needle baskets from Nicaragua
- Tropical jams from Ecuador
- Bone, ivory and soapstone carvings from Canada
- Naturally dyed flax and alpaca sweaters from Australia
- Pashmina shawls from Nepal
- Honey from the Democratic Republic of the Congo
- Cushion covers and wall hangings from India
- Salmon from Russia
- Medicinal herbs and plants from South Africa