**The Interview: Donna Fraser**

Helsinki will seem like heaven for an athlete who has been through a personal hell. She talks to Simon Turnbull about then, now - and 2012

* Sunday 24 July 2005 00:00

Top of Form

Bottom of Form

"It's very, very grotty," Donna Fraser acknowledges, plonking herself in a seat beside the 100 metres start. "Years ago everyone thought you just make do with what you've got, and that's what we're doing now. But when you compare it with the facilities at Birmingham and Sheffield we're so way behind - and there are so many athletes from London who use Crystal Palace. I really hope things will change now we've got the Olympics, that the facilities will be upgraded. Unfortunately, I won't be around to sample them. It's for the kids and the up-and-coming athletes."

At 32, Fraser is no longer a kid, although she happens to be blessed with a youthful, sunny disposition that could brighten the grottiest of dives. She is also one of track and field's great survivors; like Crystal Palace itself, only without the dilapidation. After three Achilles operations, she is going as strong as ever, and very nearly as quick. At the AAA Championships in Manchester a fortnight ago, where she became the first woman to complete a 200m-400m double since Winifred Jordan in 1945, the Croydon Harrier looked something like the graceful quarter-miler who came within a whisker of an Olympic 400m bronze medal in Sydney five years ago.

It is not beyond the bounds of possibility to imagine Fraser racing as a 39-year-old veteran in the London Olympics of 2012. "In my Zimmer frame, perhaps," she says, laughing. "The funny thing is when it was announced that we'd got the Games, Ayo [Fraser's long-time coach and "huge" influence, Ayo Falola] rang me up and said, 'Right, 800m in 2012'. And I'm like, 'You're having a laugh.' And he said, 'No. That would be a good incentive. It's in London...' So I don't want to rule it out. It would be lovely to compete in your home country. But I don't know. I just want to see how my body goes over the next two years and then see where I'm at."

On Friday night at the Palace, just two miles up the hill from her home in Penge, Fraser's spidery 6ft frame was going well for 300m in the Norwich Union London Grand Prix. Unfortunately, she still had another 100m to run and got tied up in the home straight, fading to fifth place in 51.41sec - one position and 0.41sec behind her 21-year-old British team-mate Christine Ohuruogu.

"I just felt so tired out there, but it's still good to get under 51.5sec," she said in the aftermath, determined to uphold her morale ahead of the World Championships, which open in Helsinki on 6 August.

Looking ahead to 2012, Ohuruogu will be 28 when the Olympics come to London, the athletics just a mile from her home in Stratford. She could be in the same position Cathy Freeman was in Sydney in 2000: burdened with great expectations for home gold on the track, also in the women's 400m. "Time is a funny thing," Fraser ponders. " I hope Christine goes forward and achieves what she wants to achieve, but you just never know what's going to happen. A few years back no one would have known that I was going to be out injured or that I would be in the final in Sydney."

Fraser herself was a youthful prodigy. She won a record six English Schools titles plus the European junior 400m crown in 1991 before making the British team for the Atlanta Olympics in 1996 and reaching the quarter-finals of the 400m. It was in Sydney 2000, though, that she made her big breakthrough - to the very brink of the Olympic medal rostrum. In the momentous 400m final in which the Aboriginal Freeman struck gold for Australia, Fraser took fourth place in 49.79sec, finishing fast, but not quite fast enough for the bronze medal. That went to her British team-mate Katharine Merry, by a tantalising 0.07sec.

Fraser spent six weeks that summer training with Freeman at the Thames Valley Athletics Centre in Eton. For the Aussie golden girl, it was an 11,000-mile escape from the pressures of home. She retired in 2003, still drained by the Sydney experience. Merry hung up her spikes two weeks ago, debilitated by four years of injuries. Fraser has endured three years of injury and three Achilles operations. Unlike her Sydney rivals, though, she is still standing in the international arena.

"They say that race in 2000 was a curse for the 400m runners," she reflects. "So many of us either got hurt or were just totally exhausted. It was a tough year for everybody. It's funny, but when I was training with Freeman we never spoke about Sydney. We just got on with our training, did the sessions and went home. It was a great experience. I had no pressure on me. I don't know how Freeman did it, but I guess being away from home made such a difference to her. To be honest, I wasn't surprised when she gave up. After she'd been through all that, and achieved what she did, what could she do next?

"I never looked at the video of Sydney until I came out of my last operation. Before that, Freeman came to visit me and she said, 'I want to watch it', because she hadn't really seen it. So I said, 'You can watch it. I'll turn it on and leave the room'. I couldn't watch it, because every time you wanted a different result. It was so stupid, but when I did bring myself to look at it my sister, Jenny, said, 'Donna, you know things always happen for a reason'. And I do believe now that I didn't get a medal in Sydney because there's more to come. Things are starting to click into place again now and I think of the injury as a positive, not a negative. It gave me that break to step back and gather my thoughts. I look back and think maybe I wouldn't be still going if I'd not had that injury." And, she might add, had she not happened to switch on the television set in her hospital room after recovering from her third Achilles operation in June 2003.

"It's so funny," she says, chuckling at the memory. "All through the injury I never watched athletics, but my mum and my sister came up to visit me and I said, 'Oh, let's watch the athletics. It'll be good to see it'. And Roger Black came on talking about the state of women's 400m: 'Katharine Merry. She's injured. Wasn't it great she got third in the Olympics. And Donna Fraser was fourth. Where is she now?'

"And I just blew my top. He could have said, 'Oh, unfortunately Donna's injured. Will she come back? We don't know'. That would have been different, but to totally write me off... I was just hysterical, but it was a negative I was determined to turn into a positive. I said to myself there and then, 'Right, if he's doubting me, thinking that I'm finished, I am going to get myself right and get myself up there again'. And, honest to God, there were times when I got back on the hills in training I was gritting my teeth, remembering what he said, and telling myself, 'There's no way I'm giving up'."

By last summer, the wheel had turned. Black was off the BBC athletics team and Fraser was back on the small screen, clawing her way back to international level and the Olympic arena. Despite a shortage of fitness and form, she reached the semi-finals of the 400m in Athens and ran the lead-off leg for the British quartet who finished fourth in the 4 x 400m relay final. A year on, she is looking for better things at the World Championships. "My main aim is to get to the final," she says. "I don't want to think, 'Yes, I can get a medal,' because everything has to go right beforehand. I'm just going to go for it, and we'll see what happens."

The USA, Russia and Jamaica will be difficult to get past in the 4 x 400m relay, but - with Uhuruogu, Lee McConnell and Nicola Sanders also running under 52 seconds this summer - Fraser is unlikely to be far off a medal, in the team event at least. And she does, after all, happen to be playing in a starring 4 x 4 role at present: as the thoroughbred runner cruising through an East Sussex forest at the start of the Land Rover television commercial.

It was different seven years ago when the model athlete was asked to work on a photo-shoot for a Pirelli calendar. She was used as a body double for Marie-Jose Perec, France's double Olympic 400m champion. "There was me thinking I was going to go somewhere nice and plush and we ended up in the freezing cold at a disused airfield near Swindon," Fraser reflects. "It was all right for Perec. She had a Winnebago, but she didn't invite me in. I was out there freezing like a madwoman. She's OK, but at the time she was a bit of a prima donna."

That is one accusation never likely to be levelled at the delightful, engagingly pragmatic Donna Fraser.

**Biography**

Donna Karen Fraser

Born: 7 November 1972 in Croydon.

Club: Croydon Harriers (coach, Ayo Falola). 400m specialist (personal best 49.79sec in 2000 Olympic final).

Highlights as a junior: six English Schools titles at 200m: Juniors 1986-87; Intermediates 1988-89 and Senior 1990-91. A junior international from 1988-91.

Highlights as a senior: 400m quarter-finalist in 1996 Olympics. Bronze in 1998 Commonwealth Games. Second in 400m at 2000 European Cup, fourth in 2000 Olympics. Semi-finals of 2001 World Championships. Achilles problems in 2002 and 2003, but reached semi-finals of 2004 Olympics. Currently ranked 18th in the world in the 400m.