

Freeman flounders

Cathy slower and fifth in comeback race

CATHY Freeman has plenty of hard work ahead of her if she is to catch pace-setting Ana Guevara of Mexico.

Guevara, who hasn't been beaten over 400m in more than a year, blitzed the field at the 2003 Steve Prefontaine Classic Grand Prix meet in Eugene, Oregon, yesterday.

Guevara clocked 49.34sec to break the meet record of 50.02sec set by Australia's Freeman in 1996.

In her first solo international 400m race since winning the Olympic gold medal in 49.11sec three years ago, Freeman finished a disappointing fifth with a time of 51.70sec.

She ran faster in winning

the Australian title in Brisbane six weeks ago in 51.66sec and would have anticipated clocking the Paris world championship A-qualifying entry standard of 51.37sec, or at least closer to it.

However, she and her coach, Peter Fortune, had been coughing in the days leading up to the Pre Classic and the minor illness may have played a role in her run yesterday.

"It was a little disappointing," Freeman said. "I don't think it is any indication of what kind of fitness I'm in. It was just one of those days where you are not quite on it."

She'll return to her training

base in San Francisco and may contest the US Open grand prix on June 7 before making a last-ditch attempt to qualify in Britain.

"I'm going to go away now and try to settle down and try not to get too worried about things," Freeman said.

"I still love running and I still love competing. I was happy to be here."

Freeman indicated she may confine her appearance at the world championships to the 4x400m relay if she cannot clock the A-qualifying time.

Guevara gave Freeman a hug after their race. "I am very happy for her," Guevara said. "I hope she can run very

well over the next year and in the [2004 Athens] Olympics and it will be a close race."

Freeman said she would go to Europe to continue the comeback she hopes will lead to the 2004 Athens Olympics.

Queensland giant Justin Anlezark maintained his solid form placing fifth in the shot put with his best of 20.17m, while Australian distance runners under Said Aouita's coaching regime clocked a spree of personal best times.

Sydney's Suzy Walsham broke her decade-old personal best placing sixth in the 1500m in 4min 07.78sec, with training partner Emily Morris (4:12.37) also making a breakthrough.

Youcef Abdi finished eighth in the mile in 3:56.23, beating Kenya's Olympic 1500m gold medalist Noah Ngeny, as Victorian Mark Fountain (3:59.64) also joined the sub-4 club.

Q VICTORIAN Rod De Highden won yesterday's Sydney Half Marathon. The Olympic marathon runner covered the 21.1km in just on 65min, winning by more than half a minute from Scott Westcott, with Magnus Michelsson third.

Commonwealth Games 10,000m bronze medalist Susie Power won the women's title in just over 71min and placed 11th overall.



Crushed . . . Mexico's Ana Guevara (third left) wins the 400m race yesterday as Cathy Freeman (fourth from left) finishes fifth.

Picture: AFP

Ben Rabah leads African invasion

By RAY WHEATLEY

NAOUFEL Ben Rabah is one of the most talented boxers in Australia and has the fight game in his blood.

His father was a boxer back in Tunisia and Ben Rabah's girlfriend Agnes is a top kickboxer and personal trainer in Germany.

They have a three-year-old son, Muhammad — and chances are he will one day follow the family business.

Ben Rabah, 25, is trained in Sydney by the greyhound identity Frank John Gatt, who took Hahn Bale to the 1999 National Derby. He is part of a wave of African fighters who have stayed in Australia and dominated many of the national titles here since the Olympics.

He joins Australian middleweight champion Sakio Bika (Cameroon), former national featherweight champion Jackson Asiku (Uganda) and welterweight champions Fred Kinuthia (Kenya) and Solomon Egberime (Nigeria).

There is also the light-heavyweight Peter Kariuki (Kenya), lightweight Kassim Adam (Nigeria), heavyweight Roger Izonritel (Nigeria) and flyweight Sande Kizito (Uganda), in the biggest influx of overseas boxing talent to arrive in Australia since the early 1950s.

Ben Rabah, a tall, stylish fighter with fast hands and a big punch, is the national lightweight champion and also won the IBF Pan Pacific welterweight title with an impressive 12-round decision over Kinuthia in Melbourne earlier this month. It was sweet revenge, as he lost a decision to the Kenyan at Leichhardt last year.



Now pushing into the IBF world ratings with his latest triumph, Ben Rabah fights two-time Australian Olympian James Swan at Penrith Panthers next Monday on the Danny Green-Jason DeLisle card.

He starts favourite after out-pointing Swan in Melbourne in 2001.

Ben Rabah says he hopes to earn enough money from boxing to move Agnes and Muhammad to Australia.

As an amateur he had 60 wins in 65 fights. He has fought the world's best, including the man he rates his

toughest-ever opponent — Uzbekistan's Muhammad Abdullaev, the Sydney Olympics gold medalist touted as the next Kostya Tszyu.

"There's plenty to eat in Tunisia but the living standard is poor. The average wage is only \$US100 (\$150) a month. So I decided to make a new life in Australia.

"I believe I can become world lightweight champion in 12 to 18 months."

Gatt has trained Ben Rabah for seven months and says if his fighter stays focused he will be world champion.

Eyes on the prize . . . lightweight world title hopeful Naoufel Ben Rabah with trainer Frank Gatt at their Marrickville gym.

Picture: JOHN GRAINGER

"The bloke has unbelievable talent," Gatt said. "And as a lightweight he is physically a giant."

Q EVEN a gunshot wound won't stop American power puncher Antwun Echols from heading to Australia for his WBA super-middleweight world title bout with Anthony Mundine in July or August.

Echols was shot in the armpit in a drive-by shooting in his hometown of Davenport, Iowa, on Wednesday.

But he hopes to be back in training within two weeks.

Athens defence is near

THE Hockeyroos are one win away from defending their Olympic women's hockey title in Athens next year after beating New Zealand 2-0 in Melbourne yesterday.

Sydney Olympic gold medalists Angie Skirving and Nikki Hudson scored the goals as the Australians went 1-0 up in their three-Test Oceania Olympic qualifying series in Melbourne.

Defender Skirving put the home side in front from a corner after seven minutes. The Black Sticks were unlucky not to equalise soon after but Australia dominated the first half, forcing Kiwi goalkeeper Helen Clarke to make two good saves to keep her team in the contest.

Striker Hudson put away the second goal seven minutes into the second half to extend Australia's run of dominance over their trans-Tasman rivals.

A win in Thursday's second Test in Auckland would seal a spot among the 10 teams in Athens for the Hockeyroos, with the series concluding at Whangarei, also in New Zealand, on Saturday.

Hockeyroos coach David Bell said his team had shown positive signs despite a five month lay-off since last year's World Cup.

"Priority number one was to win the first of the series and take the lessons of that into the next two games," Bell said.

Spaniard reigns in the rain

SPAIN'S Sete Gibernau won a rain-interrupted French motorcycle Grand Prix at Le Mans last night, ahead of fellow Honda rider Valentino Rossi of Italy and Brazilian Yamaha rider Alex Barros.

It was a disappointing night for Ducati, with Loris Capirossi retiring early and his Australian teammate Troy Bayliss sliding off the track soon after.

Rain interrupted the race on the 16th of the 28 laps. Under new rules, the remaining laps were completed after the riders were allowed two warm-up laps before starting again on the grid in the order they were before the break.

Rossi started first on pole ahead of Barros, Japan's Tohru Ukawa and Honda teammate Max Biaggi of Italy. Gibernau had been on the second row of the grid.

Barros went quickly into the lead ahead of Gibernau and Rossi, though Rossi motored to the front with three laps to go ahead of the Spaniard. But Gibernau held on to beat the four-time world champion.

Spain's Toni Elias, riding an Aprilia, won the 250cc race, ahead of Frenchman Randy de Puniet (Aprilia) and Honda rider Roberto Rolfo of Italy. Australia's Anthony West finished seventh on his Aprilia.

And 17-year-old Australian Casey Stoner (Aprilia) finished fourth in the 125cc grand prix, behind winner Daniel Pedrosa (Honda).