Evening Standard

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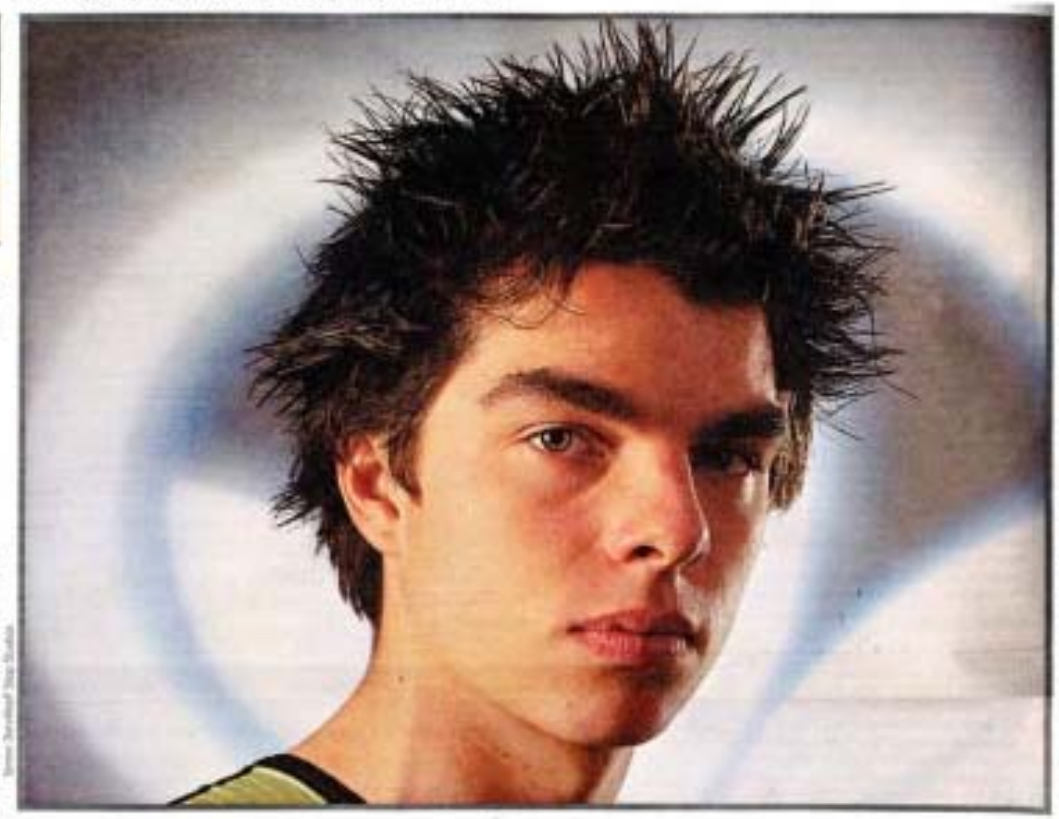

Brilliant Olly is our brightest hope

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Derek Burton, or to pursue the road to sporting glory taken by its cricket-ing colossus Colin Cowdrey.

"It was a key moment for me," recalls Freeman, snatching a break between training at the University of Brighton campus in Eastbourne.

"I'd been teetering on the edge, agonising over whether it should be Cambridge or triathlon and the 2012 decision nudged me over. I'd resigned myself to Paris winning but then thought, 'Wow, an Olympics in London — it's unmissable'."

His mind was made up. He had already deferred his place at Cambridge for a year to try full-time training and now decided to go for broke.

"I wrote to the college again and asked in as many words, 'Any chance you could hold this place open for me?' and they said they would. Indefinitely.

"I felt lucky and privileged because if my triathlon proves a flop, I'll have lost a few years but essentially I could be back where I was after finishing school."

He doesn't think he will fail but it remains to be seen just how bright this bright young thing has really been. The size of the gamble he'd taken quickly dawned when 18 months ago he upped from his home in Smarden, Kent, to live and train in Eastbourne where his coach, Glenn Cook, is based.

Swept from his comfy middle-class existence and long before his current lottery funding and sponsorship deals, he was suddenly presented with the culture shock of fending for himself on a pittance in seedy rented digs.

As he trooped round neighbouring streets employed as the oldest paper boy in town to make ends meet, he might have permitted himself the wistful daydream that if he'd made the rational decision, it would have all been panting and Pizza's, not paper rounds. But you get no complaints from this chirpy soul.

"The thing is I do really enjoy academic work," he admits. "But, currently, my true passion is triathlon."

Which is just as well because a typical day like this drags him down from his girlfriend's parents' home in Eastbourne — his new base now the seedy digs are thankfully history — to the pool at T.Ham for a 90-minute swim. Later there's 45 minutes running, a 90-minute conditioning and weights session in the gym and another 90 minutes cycling.

But how mind-numbing are these monotonous routines for such a fertile mind? "Well it's true it's not rocket science," smiles Freeman but he's adamant that a mathematical brain has helped scientific analysis of his training methods and techniques.

Harsh lessons could lie ahead for Freeman as he enters the senior triathlon ranks. The best teenager in Europe suddenly finds going twice the distance against competitors who are twice as strong, men not boys.

That's the challenge. It's fine, he says, but of all his brothers, friends and family not one believes he's made the wrong decision. His dad Andy, a brilliant junior swimmer in Britain squad who sacrificed his chance of an Olympic appearance once he went to study in Cambridge.

Yet his boy Olly will not ever have to ask himself "what if?" Bernard, for him, there's only one glittering prize and it will be found on the banks of the Thames not the Cam.

FREEMAN OF LONDON

Born: 11 January, 1988
Educated: Tonbridge School
Major achievements: European junior triathlon champion — 2004/05; world junior triathlon silver medallist — 2004; world junior duathlon champion — 2004/05; three-time GB junior triathlon champion; Under-17 English national cross-country champion — 2003; London Triathlon junior champion — 2004/05.