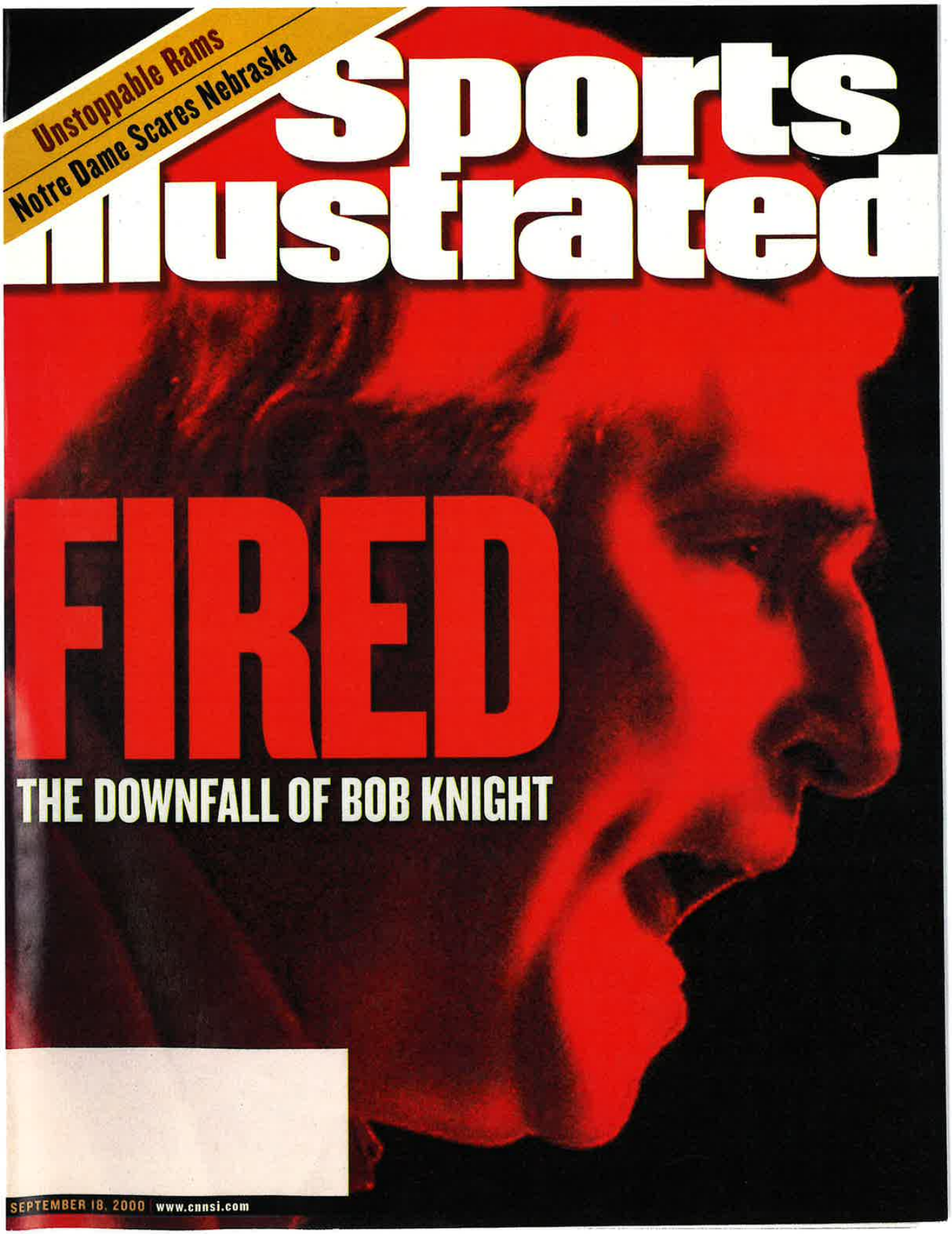

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silver, and gold at the 1997 and '99 world championships—has made her a celebrity, especially among Aborigines, who haven't claimed a high-profile champion since '70s tennis star Evonne Goolagong. NBC first contacted Freeman in 1994, when she and researcher Joe Gesue met in New York. "Many interviews we do are 10 to 15 minutes," says Gesue, now the research team head. "Hers was about an hour and 15 minutes. It was fascinating listening to her story."

He pitched it to Lax, who featured Freeman in Atlanta and followed with an *Olympic Show* piece in 1998. She's a natural for a Sydney update: Australians eagerly await the 400 final, and some Aboriginal groups have threatened to protest at the Games. For this assignment, Lax sought a more personal angle. "I wanted to get to the core of who she is," Lax says. "Her Aboriginality, where she came from and her national heroism."

Lax interviewed Australian sources but couldn't connect with Freeman until the star made a surprise training trip to Los Angeles. Then, Lax says, "she was more candid than ever."

By July, she and editor Meredith Paige had amassed tape covering several years. Shots were digitized and sorted into subject categories, and then Lax spent several long days combining the elements and writing the script. More than five years in the making, the three-minute, 45-second story will air around the time of the Sept. 25 women's 400 final. "Besides being about a great athlete," Lax says, "this piece has texture, history and depth. It's a really rich story."—*B.W.*