

A slippery lawyer who gets celebs off the hook – or a brilliant legal mind who understands the system better than anyone? **Angela Epstein** hears the case for the defence from Nick ‘Mr Loophole’ Freeman

Stars keep coming to me because I do the job properly

TELL anyone you're interviewing Nick Freeman, superstar solicitor and premier league loophole hunter, and the mere mention of his name triggers strident opinion. And a shopping list of suggested questions.

One white collar back-slapper I know simply wants the formula. A barrister friend sniffsly suggests asking him about working in the 'gutter' end of law. Oh yes, and a female detractor barks that Mr Loophole should explain how he lives with himself – before admitting that she finds him so 'mefingly action man' that she wants me to find out whether women 'come on to him'. Quite.

All fine points to put to the man whose exposure of the seemingly laughable state of British justice ensures his enduring infamy and whose unstoppable career trajectory has made him the bane of road safety campaigners.

Certainly, the Cheshire-based lawyer seems invincible. His reputation in getting celebrities such as Sir Alex Ferguson and David Beckham – his most recent big-name client being Tottenham footballer Jermain Defoe – off the hook by securing acquittals on technicalities is legendary. So, too, are his fees.

So Nick, I ask, as we settle down to chat, how's the credit crunch been for you?

"Well, we're busier than ever – though, of course, we can't be complacent," admits the 52 year-old father of

two, who lives with his family in Mere. Hang on, I say, people are losing their jobs, their homes, turning down the thermostat. How can this be so?

"At a time of economic meltdown people place even higher priority on their driving licence," he explains.

Well, they certainly do if they don't want to keep the rest of the first 11 waiting. With business this brisk, could he retire tomorrow?

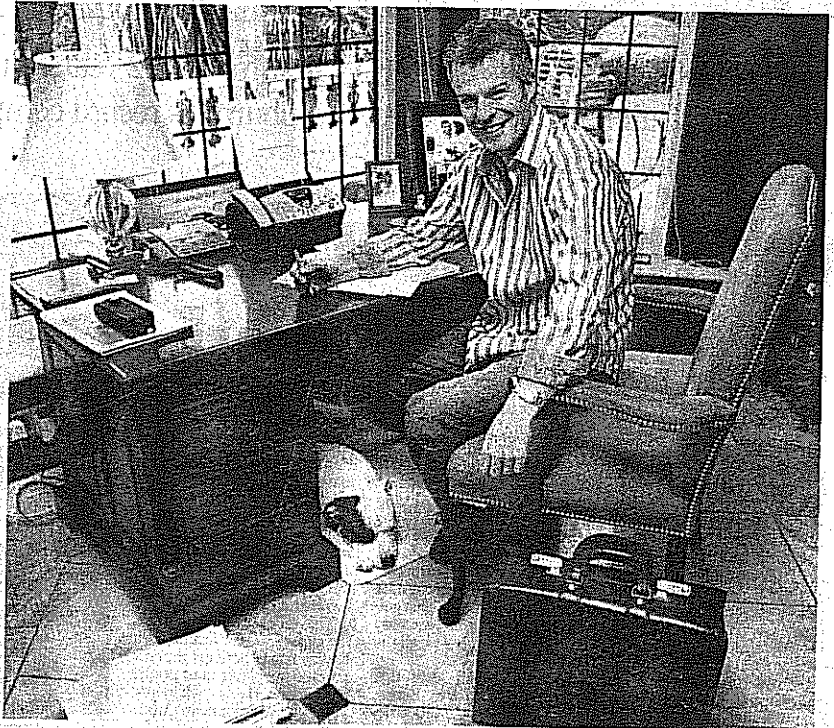
"Ask my accountant," he bats back, with a pleasant smile.

Which possibly means he could, though it's quickly apparent that Nick Freeman has no wish to. Not because he is motivated by money, but, by a desire, as he repeats constantly, "to be a good lawyer".

Which makes it as good a time as any to raise the question about working in what his peers may regard as the fag-end of law.

"I know some see it that way, but it's totally misconstrued. My work involves using the right defence of law and legal arguments coupled with old-fashioned advocacy skills. It's challenging, fulfilling and rewarding. What's more, until recently nobody wanted to touch this area of law. It was so technical and complicated. Now there are endless lawyers claiming to be an expert – though I've been inundated with work because others haven't done their job properly.

"The quality of my clients satiates my legal ambition. Otherwise, how else does one get recognition? I get a massive satisfaction by doing the job properly and the fact that, among others, footballers, rock stars and actors want my services."



DRIVING AMBITION Lawyer to the stars Nick Freeman at his home in Mere

His own formula for success and staying ahead of the competition hasn't changed since the Nottingham-born lawyer first qualified in 1981. "You have to know the case and the law intimately. Having been a prosecutor for Greater Manchester Police I've been on the other side, so I'm always trying to work out what the other side's next move will be."

Yet his words fall, to quote HG Wells, as bows and arrows against the lightning, since public opinion remains largely needed by the perception that moneyed offenders are getting off and making our roads more dangerous. And though Freeman is a vocal exponent of toughening up our drink driving laws, he remains a target for venomous comment. Does it hurt?

"I know there are many conflicting views about what I do. I could say, well why me, why not lawyers who get terrorists off the hook? Do people think drink driving is such an odious crime that the accused are not entitled to a defence? Is that what society suggests? I'd love to sit with people who think like this and persuade them of the sensible view."

You might expect there to be something slick about a man who has

trademarked his nickname in a bid to stop others using it, but in fact he seems quite the opposite. Lean, affable and dressed in jeans and baby pink sweater, Freeman is hardly jet-set glamour (actually he gets ferociously travel sick and on his honeymoon had to be stretchered off the plane).

In fact there's something rather traditional about him – perhaps it's the public school accent, the fact he loves Coronation Street or that he avoids computers and has never sent an email in his life.

Is charm, then, part of his success?

He bristles slightly: "I don't like the word charm. It connotes pretence. What I do believe in is being pleasant to everyone I meet, particularly at work."

And what about attention from female clients...

There's a pause and a quizzical eyebrow. "I'm extremely professional about the way I deal with clients – it's

important to keep a distance," he replies smoothly.

I must look disappointed because he throws me a carrot, admitting that after successfully defending one rock star's wife she began sending him increasingly amorous messages on his phone. He resolved the situation by passing the mobile to his wife, Stephanie, who sent back a killer text which read: "Please don't 'babe' my husband – he's mine."

Though his work takes him all over the country, Freeman remains in Manchester because, he says, it grounds him. In a you-can't-beat-northerners anecdote, he tells me about walking through the city centre one evening when five hoodies started shouting "Mr Loophole" at him.

"I thought, 'I'm dead'. Then they came up to me and said 'Mr Loophole, you're the best ***** lawyer in the world'."

And that, give or take the asterisks, is all he says he wants to be.

"I want to be remembered as being a very good lawyer, one who made a difference in the way the law operates."

Time will tell whether he'll deserve such an accolade – or whether he'll wing it on a loophole.