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Cathy Freeman



Written by Bea Silverberg

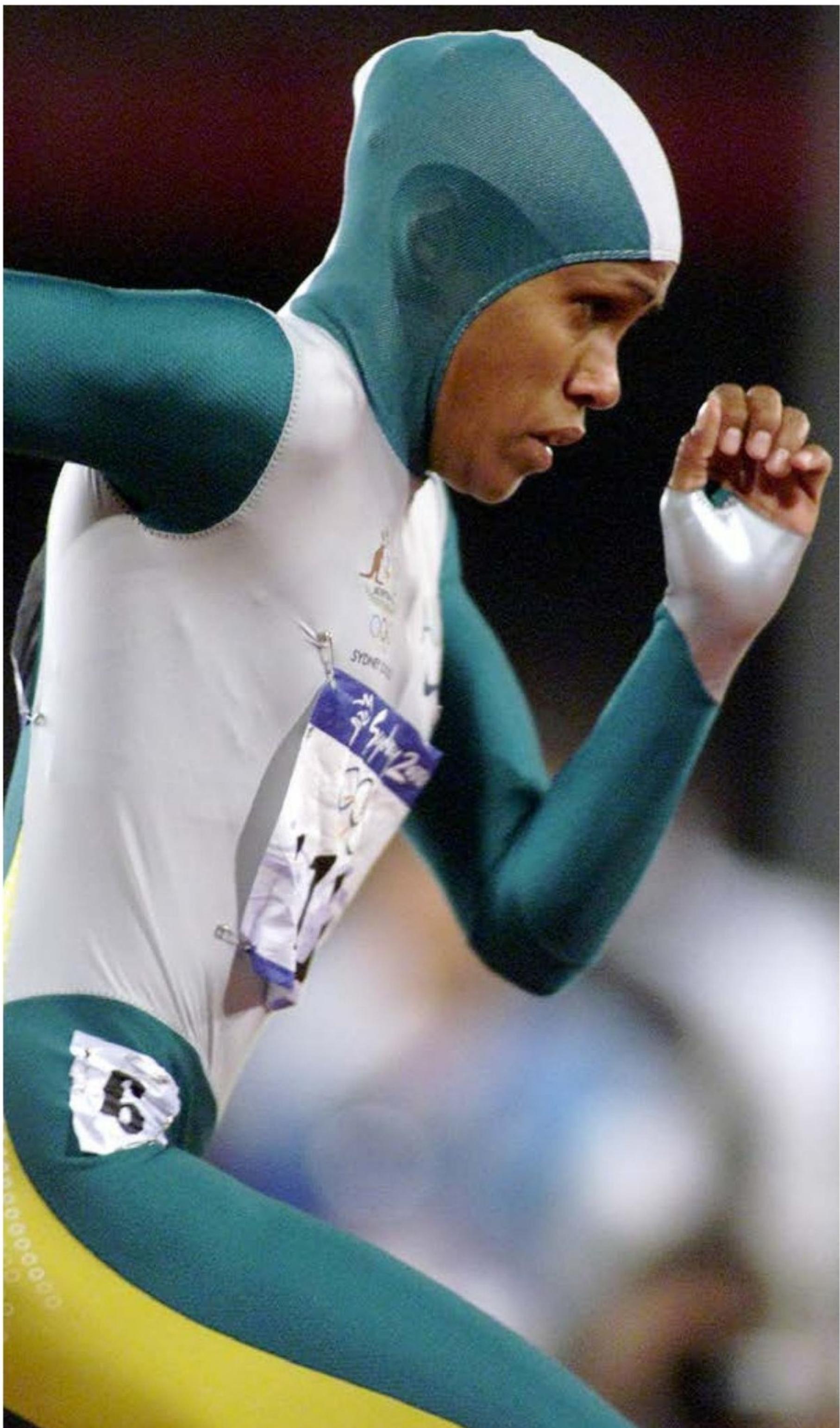
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Cathy Freeman at the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney

Introduction

The whole world watched a determined young woman win the gold in the 400-meter dash at the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney, Australia. Her name is Cathy Freeman. She is an Aborigine (ab-uh-RIJ-uh-nee) — one of a group of people who are native to Australia. She accepted the medal for her country, Australia, and for her people, the Aborigine. She was the first Aborigine to capture such a high honor. She is a powerful symbol of the hopes of the Aboriginal people. She is also a powerful symbol for more understanding among people all over the world.

Aboriginal and Australian Past

The Aborigine are the first people who lived in Australia, before Europeans settled there. The word *Aborigine* means “from the beginning” and refers to the indigenous, or original, people of Australia. They roamed the country both in the milder coastal regions and in the harsh interior desert lands, called the *outback*. They are a dark-skinned people, grouped into tribes, with their own spiritual beliefs and ways of living.



An Aboriginal man



Captain James Cook claiming Australia for Great Britain

English explorers under Captain James Cook claimed Australia as a colony for Great Britain in 1780. British settlers soon followed. They believed their way of life was better than the tribal ways and called the Aborigines inferior. There was a great deal of fighting between the newcomers and the Aborigines. The British newcomers had much more powerful weapons and were able to defeat the Aborigines.

The fighting was often very cruel, and large numbers of Aborigines were killed. The British set up a new government based on the British way of life. They ruled the whole country and forced their own religion, Christianity, on the Aboriginal people.



Aborigines living in a church mission

The new rulers looked upon the Aborigines as savages and gave them no rights. Aborigines were forced to live separate from the settlers. Most of the Aborigines lived in the remote outback, often placed on reservations or church missions. Some lived on the outskirts of towns where they worked for the Europeans for little or no pay. The government tried to force European ways on the Aboriginal people and destroy their languages and their ways of living and believing.

Over 200 years ago, when the English first settled in Australia, there were between one million and three million Aborigines speaking about 250 different languages. Now there are only about 200,000 (45,000 full-blood), speaking only 100 languages. They have died off in very large numbers during the past 200 years. They have died because of terrible fighting, diseases brought by the Europeans, and poor living conditions.



An Aboriginal woman

Even as recently as 1951, the Australian government passed laws that did not allow Aborigines to own property. They were not allowed to take certain jobs, to marry whom they wanted, to move where they wanted, or to live by their own ways.



An Aboriginal woman teaching young Aborigines an ancient story

Cathy's Early Years

Catherine Astrid Salome Freeman was born to Aboriginal parents on February 16, 1973. She grew up in a small town on the east coast of Australia with her immediate family and many cousins. Cathy's grandfather, known as "The King," was an outstanding football player and an excellent runner. Her father, Norman Freeman, also a fine athlete, upheld the family's reputation on the football field. Cathy was fortunate to have inherited her athletic talent from both of these men.

Cathy's mother, Cecelia, was half Aborigine. She had been raised on Palm Island, off the Queensland coast. Cecelia's mother (Cathy's beloved Nanna Sibley) and her relatives were removed from their tribal home to Palm Island. This was part of the government's rulings to move Aborigines away from their original land. This kind of unjust treatment in her own family helped Cathy to develop a fighting spirit.

When Cathy was five years old, her father left the family after being very sick

and developing a drinking problem. Cathy's mother struggled to earn a living to support her family. Her second daughter, Anne-Marie, had been born with a disabling illness. At nine years of age, Anne-Marie had been placed in a home for children with special needs. To Cathy, her sister's disability reminded her of how fortunate she was to have a healthy, strong body with which to accomplish her dreams.

Cathy ran her first race when she was six. Her teachers and her new stepfather, Bruce Barber, recognized her speed, grace, and energy as she ran laps around the local track. Bruce predicted that she would become an Olympic star, and he set about to help make it happen. Cathy started her training with the dream that she would some day become a champion Olympic runner.

At age eleven, Cathy set a new national record in the high jump at a big track meet in Melbourne. In the same year, she won state titles in the 100-meter and 200-meter sprints and the high jump for her age group.



Young Cathy

Encouraged by her family, Cathy attended excellent high schools on scholarships. She trained under a professional coach, who prepared her for her first great victory when she was sixteen. She won a gold medal in the 4 x 100-meter relay team at the Commonwealth Games in 1990. That same year, she was voted Young Australian of the Year. In the following year, she was named Aboriginal Athlete of the Year.

The Aborigines Win Some Rights

During the decade of the 1960s, Cathy's tribal people were speaking out to gain more rights. The first important success was a law passed in 1967 that allowed Aborigines to become citizens. This law gave them the right to vote and to receive some government benefits. They were finally able to have a say in Australian government policies.



An Aboriginal protester at Parliament House in Canberra



Aboriginal territory sign, Uluru National Park, Australia

The Aborigines also spoke out to protect their lands. Their belief, similar to Native Americans in the United States and Canada, is that the land is sacred and cannot be owned by individuals. They worked to protect their land from development and from use by non-Aborigines who would not treat it with respect. They also worked for the right to have their own government instead of being governed by European laws that did not respect their ways. In 1972, a law was passed that gave the Aborigine some of the rights they demanded.

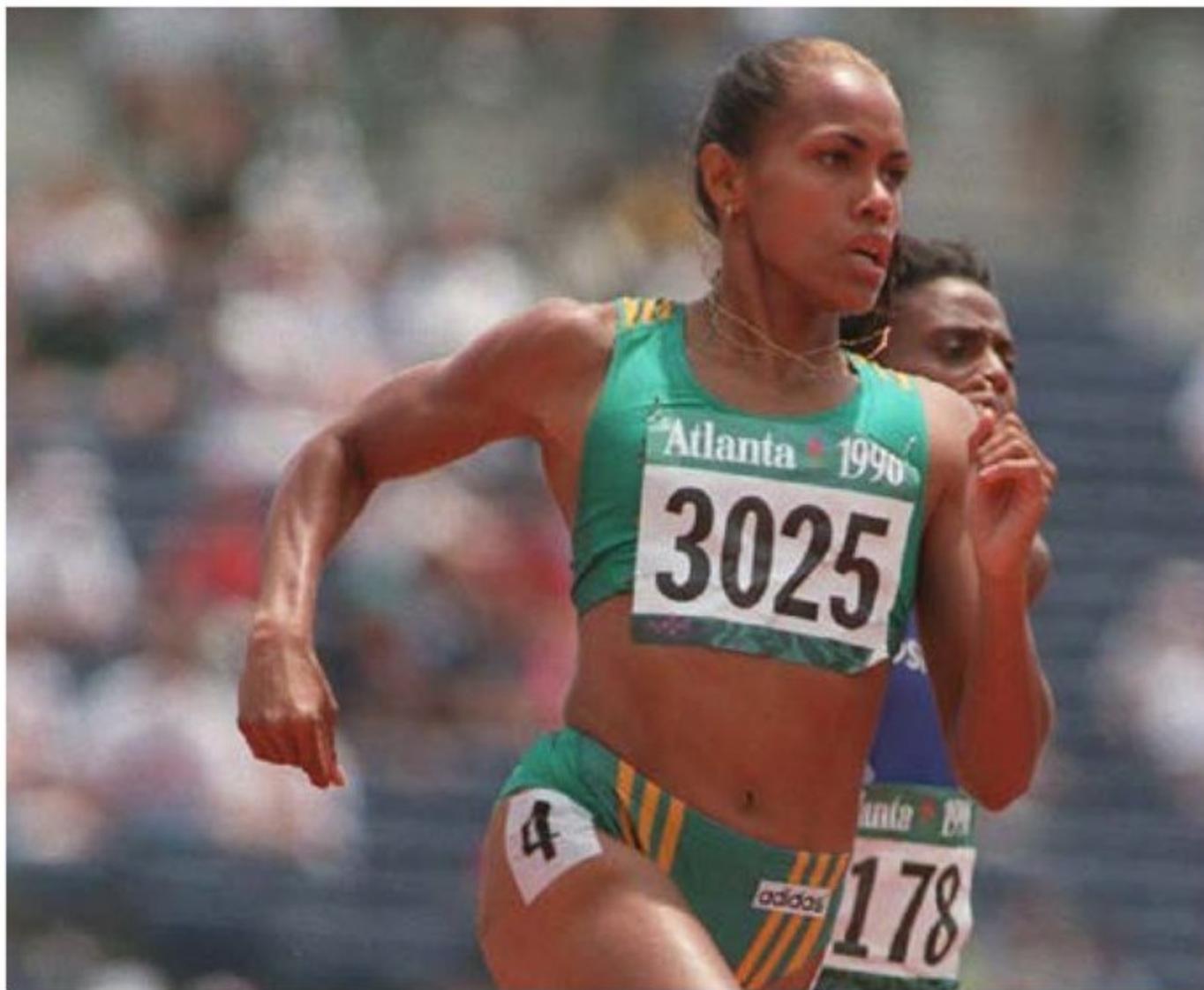
Cathy on the Road to Success

These gains in citizenship and the right to own and manage land were great victories for the Aborigines. They have had more than 200 years of mistreatment to overcome. Cathy Freeman was becoming widely known for her amazing running ability, but as an Aborigine, she still had to deal with many non-Aborigines thinking she was inferior.

Cathy took great pride in who she was and wanted all the people in Australia to be proud of her accomplishments, both as an Aborigine and as an Australian. She tried to speak out to correct the wrongs against her people. It wasn't always easy, but she had courage and determination.



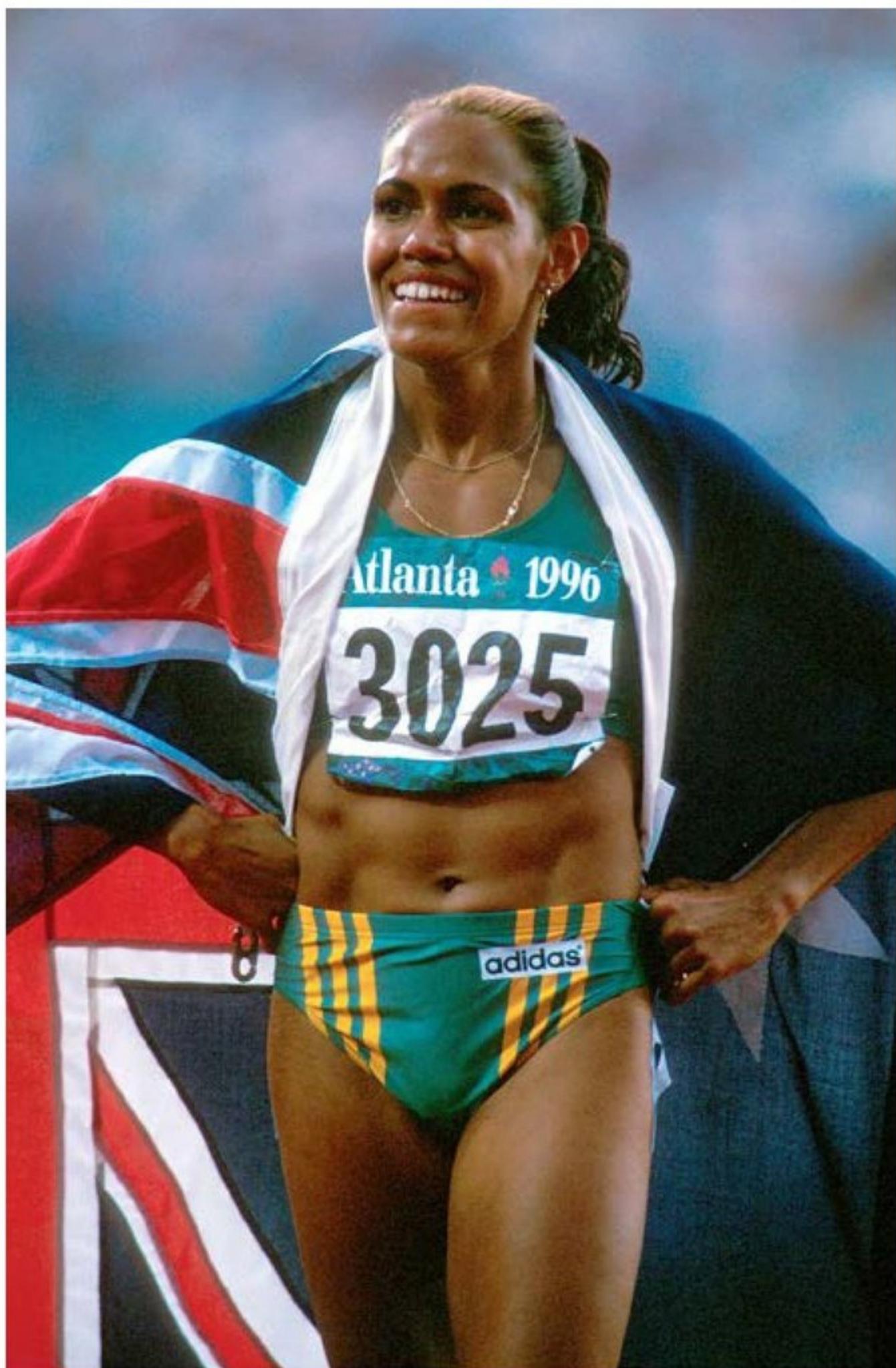
1994 Commonwealth Games in Victoria, British Columbia, Canada



Cathy running in the 1996 Summer Olympic Games

In 1994, at the Commonwealth Games in Victoria, Cathy won gold medals in the 200-meter and 400-meter races. In celebration, she ran around the track carrying both the red-white-and-blue Australian flag and the black-red-and-yellow Aboriginal flag. Some people disapproved of her showing the tribal flag. They said what she did was an act of protest. Cathy responded that she was merely showing her national pride. After some time, it became clear that all the people of Australia, both non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal, were looking upon this young, remarkable, world-class runner as a real champion. She was winning the support of all people in her rise to fame.

Cathy's dream of going to the Olympic Games came true in 1996 in Atlanta, Georgia. She ran the 400-meter dash in her best time ever. It made her the sixth fastest woman in history, but she lost the gold medal to an even faster runner. She did win the silver, and with it, the respect and admiration of the Australian people.



Cathy takes the silver medal in the women's 400-meter final at the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta, Georgia

The following year, she won a major international track title at a World Championship event in Athens, Greece. As she circled the stadium in the victory lap, she again carried both the Australian and Aboriginal flags, and no one objected. Soon after, she was named Australian of the Year. This took her another step toward being an important role model for Aborigines. In doing so, she was helping all Australians come together as one people.



Carrying the Australian national flag and the Aboriginal Community Flag after winning the women's 400-meter event in Athens



Athletics World Championship, 1999, Sevilla, Spain

The years 1998 and 1999 brought Cathy even more success. She again won the 400-meter title at a World Championship event and the national title at Melbourne. She showed her great belief in herself and in her ability to succeed through constant training. She would not let success go to her head. Cathy said, “Money makes life easier but I don’t want to be rich. . . . I don’t want to be a celebrity either. . . . As long as my family and loved ones are there, I’m happy. . . . My family has always come first. I have always found security and comfort in their arms.”

Carrying both flags during a victory lap at the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney



Olympic Fame

The Olympic Games of the Year 2000 were held in Sydney, Australia. Cathy Freeman was a leading contender for a gold medal. She was honored by being chosen to light the Olympic torch. Then, in a stunning 400-meter run, Cathy won Australia's 100th gold medal in a stadium in her own country. All Australians cheered wildly as they watched her carry both flags in her victory lap. Together they sang the national anthem and proudly spoke about "Our Cathy." Cathy presented her bouquet of Australian flowers to her mother, Cecelia, whose teary face was filled with pride and joy.

Cathy Freeman is a real world champion, both on the running track and in life. She has become a role model for all Australians. She has shown the world that you can become what you want to be by working hard to reach your goals. And for the entire world, she has given hope for greater understanding among all people.



Cathy at the awards ceremony after receiving a gold medal in the women's 400-meter race at the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney

FOR MORE INFORMATION

About Cathy Freeman

- www.melbournetrackclub.com.au

About Sports

- www.olympic.org/museum
- www.commonwealthgames.com

About the Australian Aborigine People

- www.aiatsis.gov.au
Australian Institute of Aboriginal
and Torres Strait Islander Studies

- www.vaclang.org.au
Victorian Aboriginal Corporation
for Languages

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