The Sydney Games and Cathy Freeman Overshadow the Corruption and Distortion

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The Sydney Olympics, like all those before it, had both its wonderful moments and its controversies. For Sydney undoubtedly the defining moment occurred when Cathy Freeman took the gold medal in the 400-meter race. A nation stopped and gave its undivided attention as one of its citizens of aboriginal origin ran away from the field. The 110,000 fans in Olympic Stadium cheered wildly, thousands just outside the stadium watching on a large screen television did the same, and in downtown Sydney yet another large vocal crowd screamed in joy at the sight of Freeman's exquisite run. As if to underline the point it was the 100th Gold Medal for Australia in Olympic competition.

Across the country the scene was repeated. In towns, in villages, in schools, in homes, Australians gathered for this special moment of their Olympic games. It was not a disappointment. This young woman carrying enormous pressure on her shoulders responded with a near perfect run. When she finished she made the lap around the stadium carrying the flags of both her nations. Six years ago this gesture brought criticism to Cathy Freeman; this time even the unreconstructed Prime Minister voiced his approval.

With pride and grace and joy Cathy Freeman mesmerized a nation and the world, and those who find sport an insignificant exercise belonging to the toy department of life were once again treated to conclusive evidence of how wrong they are.

Cathy Freeman's run will not change anything in the history of Australia; it will not improve the condition of the Aboriginal people who live at the poverty level in Australia. However it was a symbolic moment when a nation embraced its history in a way that it had not done before. In the long run it could prove to be more than symbolic, while in the short run it is already a moment of considerable significance.

For those of us who grew up in a racially divided United States and saw Jackie Robinson and other African-American athletic pioneers give the lie to the folk myths of our society, there is a particular resonance in the Cathy Freeman story. Never again will the myths concerning Aboriginal people and Aboriginal society ring as true as they once did in Australia. The young who hear the voices of racism and denigration will always have another perspective from which to draw and measure Australian stereotypes.
This is what is so important about what happened on the track in Sydney during the 400-meter run, and what happened as Cathy Freeman circled the track on her victory lap.

When it was over and Freeman talked of the pressure on her, when she spoke of how much a symbol she has become for all Australians and especially for Aboriginal children, and when she smiled her wonderful smile this Olympics became her Olympics. In a way all that came after this moment was but a footnote.

The fact that Cathy Freeman lighted the torch at the beginning of the games now seems even more appropriate than it did when it happened. Now the rest of the world should understand why it was so important that Cathy Freeman was the one chosen for that honor.

There were of course other memorable and wonderful moments at these games. The Australian success in the pool, the near upsets of the NBA Nightmare team, the extraordinary Chinese divers, the achievements of Marion Jones, and the adventures of Eric the Eel who now joins Eddie the Eagle in Olympic folklore were among them.

For Americans the U.S. softball team and soccer teams provided thrills, as did the baseball team. Michael Johnson and Maurice Greene lived up to billing, as did so many others across the venues. Perhaps the most amazing moment for Americans was the victory by Rulan Gardner in Greco-Roman wrestling over the Siberian Bear, Alexandre Karelin, who had not lost in thirteen years of competition.

In the end however what is always best about the Olympics is that it is a special time in sport when the best athletes in a cornucopia of sporting events come together in one place to compete. Some win, some lose, all compete.

So despite the corruption at the highest levels of the games and the fact that a bribe may have put the games in Sydney; despite the legion of failed drug tests and successful masking of drugs beating the tests; despite the theft of a gold medal over a common cold; despite the crass commercialism of the games; despite the bogus nationalism on display; this is still a wonderful celebration of the best qualities of human competition. The Games also revealed a beautiful city and fascinating country to many of us who knew little about it.
I will do my best to remember all the positives as I continue to curse NBC television and the arrogance and hubris of Dick Ebersol which have cast a dark shadow over what were apparently one of the best Olympic celebrations of all time. I only wish Ebersol and company had allowed me to participate as fully as I might have.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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