The Olympic Stage: A Focus on Racism Down Under

by Richard E. Lapchick

The world was both warmed and electrified when Cathy Freeman, an Aboriginal woman, raised her arm to light the Olympic Flame in Sydney during the Opening Ceremonies of the 2000 Games. The centuries old racism, which included genocide, aimed at her Aboriginal people has received more international attention during the last month than at any other period in history. The selection of Freeman to light the flame was surely a statement being made by the Olympic organizers about healing wounds. I also believe it was meant to upstage the on-going protests by small groups of Aboriginal people.

Arms raised by athletes at the Mexico City Olympics brought an altogether different reaction. There is no small irony that the story regarding racism against the Aboriginal people that unfolded in the Sydney Olympics started 32 years ago in Mexico City in what remains the single most spectacular racial image in the history of sport.

In 1968, there was no broad international debate about racism in his country when white Australian Peter Norman took the stand with John Carlos and Tommie Smith as they startled the world with their clenched fist salute. Norman got with Smith and Carlos before the ceremony and agreed to wear the white button symbolizing their protest against racism in the United States and in South Africa. He was, at once, supporting the stands of Smith and Carlos while also making his own, fully recognizing that his own country had serious racial problems. While he took flack back home for his actions, Norman helped to briefly open discussions about the devastating policies of his own government against the Aboriginal people.

When Cathy Freeman went on to win the gold, she draped herself in the flags of both the Aboriginal people and that of Australia. It was a global, feel-good moment. It did not take long for the story to shift from race to drugs as five Olympians were banned and 15 were suspended or withdrew, including two gold medal winners. The shame of these games distracted the world from its momentary focus on race in Australia. Could Freeman's act and the positive response to it unify a nation? The question on the minds of so many trying to bring people together in Australia was how long the spotlight on the Aboriginal people would remain inside the home of the 2000 Olympics.

For those of us in the United States where we still grapple daily with how centuries of racial oppression have forever marked the course of our nation, too many remain unaware of how global racism is. Our knowledge of Aboriginal history was as meager as its was about apartheid in South Africa until sports boycotts of that evil regime forced Americans to read about apartheid on our sports pages. Like Europeans coming to an America populated by a native American people and to a South Africa inhabited by African peoples, the British came to an Australia in 1788 which was already home for a native people, the Aboriginals.

Population estimates vary widely but there were at least 250,000 (some say there were up to 750,000) people in Australia when the British landed in northern Australia. Like Native Americans and Africans, they were not "one people" but up to 500 distinct groups with their own languages and cultures. Also like the Native Americans and Africans, they were viewed as "one" by the white settlers. Before anyone stopped them, the genocidal policies had reduced the Aboriginal population to 31,000 in 1910.

Government policy shifted around 1910 to create what is now known as "the stolen generations." It was expressly designed to lead to the physical and social decimation of the remaining Aboriginal people

through "absorption." Cathy Freeman, an apolitical athlete for most of her career, spoke out this summer and decried the policy under which two of her own grandparents were stolen. Like thousands around the world, she criticized Prime Minister John Howard's refusal to officially apologize for the government's policy.

The Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission issued a detailed report documenting a government policy that resulted in a 60 year wave of terror in which "not one indigenous family escaped the effects of forcible removal."

The Commission estimated that 30 percent of the children were stolen and sent to missions and boarding schools between 1910-1970, separated forever from their mothers and fathers. They took the lightest skinned children, separated brothers from sisters, taught girls the skills to be domestics and the boys how to work on farms. They were not allowed to speak their own languages and were taught that their own culture was bankrupt and to be abandoned like their parents. Children were told that their parents had died or that they didn't want them.

I spoke in Sydney at the International Conference on Human Rights and Sports exactly one year before the opening ceremonies. Both scholars and traditional Aboriginal leaders expressed many concerns of the Aboriginal people there. One of the scholars was Colin Tatz, the foremost authority on the genocide committed against the Aborigines. While their population has grown back to nearly 315,000, they are at the bottom of every social rung.

According to Tatz, they did not even know of coronary disease, cancer, diabetes and respiratory infections 30 years ago. Now Aborigines contract these diseases more than white Australians. Male Aboriginals can expect to live only 50 plus years while females average just 55 years. That is more than 20 years less than whites. Their unemployment rate is triple that of whites; their income is 25 percent less than for whites. Their arrest rates are grossly out of proportion to their numbers. Crimes such as murder, rape, assault, child molestation and drug use, unthought of in their communities before the stolen generations, are now common. The youth suicide rate for Aboriginal children is, according to Tatz, among the highest in the world.

Signs of change were obvious even a year ago. The Aboriginal peoples were acknowledged as the rightful owners of the land. Information about the genocide and the stolen generations were available at public cultural centers. Tourists were directed to Aboriginal historical tours. In addition to athletes and spectators in Sydney this month, thousands of international writers and broadcasters came to the world's biggest sports festival known as the Olympics.

The dreadful time differences led to more human-interest stories. Before the complicated quest of Marion Jones opened up, the story of Cathy Freeman and her people dominated the news. Told and retold in every corner of the globe, the Australian Government, even if it won't apologize for the stolen generations, had its record of racism placed on the world's agenda.

Sports opened a doorway on this history of hate and the resulting despair of too many of its people. It was not so different than the global window opened on apartheid by the sports boycott. Nor was it so unlike the universal awakening to America's racial history that resulted when Tommy Smith and John Carlos, with Australian Peter Norman by their side, stood tall on the Mexico City medal stand. Politicians and leaders knew about these things, but the masses in other nations were shaken into reality through stories on the sports pages.

News about drugs usurped some of the glory that was due to the Sydney organizers. However, these Games will have a positive, lasting legacy if the world forces Australia to keep addressing the symbolism these Games created: Aboriginal leadership represented by Cathy Freeman and the fact that two people coexist amidst great tensions and grave injustices on their own continent.

Australians, white and Aboriginal, are unlikely to forget their new sports hero draped in two flags. The question that begs to be answered waves in the cool breezes of September in Sydney: can these two people come together to right the wrongs and build a nation in which all acknowledge their past and work toward their futures.

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