

Harmony in ceremony

SYDNEY, Sept 16: The Olympic opening ceremony was Saturday hailed as a reconciliation milestone by Aboriginal leaders, but Prime Minister John Howard failed to grasp the olive branch, reports AFP.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission chairman Geoff Clark said many Aboriginals would see the event as a unifying point in Australia's history.

"The recognition of our culture in the creation scenes, the smoking ceremony, acknowledgement of our flag and symbols demonstrated true and proper respect for our people," he said.

"It was a celebration of our survival. A milestone on the road to true reconciliation from which there should be no turning back."

Howard's government has come under international criticism for failing to say sorry to Aboriginals for past injustices — including policies of past governments which forcibly removed Aboriginal children from their parents.

Last month, Howard threatened to pull Australia out of the UN committee system and veto UN human rights visits in re-

sponse to what he saw as ill-informed criticism of the way Australia deals with Aboriginals. While he praised the ceremony Saturday, Howard refused to comment on whether the choice of Aboriginal Cathy Freeman to light the cauldron had helped smooth the path for reconciliation.

"Well I thought it was a terrific choice," was all he said. And it emerged Saturday that Sydney's best kept secret wasn't that secret at all — Freeman knew she was to light the cauldron six months ago.

Australian Olympic Committee president John Coates said the decision had been made in Los Angeles in March when Olympics Minister Michael Knight and SOCOG chief executive Sandy Hollway had dinner with her.

The choice of Freeman has met with widespread approval and helped capped a strong indigenous element in the opening ceremony.

Australia's newspapers were unanimous in their praise, saying the images portrayed to the world gave hope that black and white Australia could heal their rifts.

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ORIGINAL ABORIGINAL: Aboriginal dancers putting up a grand show during the opening ceremony of the 2000 Games on September 15.



STOPPED BY THE EAGLES: Mark Viduka (C), the Australian forward, being marked by Nigeria's Godwin Oparika (L) and Celestine Babayaro during their crucial Olympic football Group A clash at Sydney yesterday. Australia went out of the competition after a 2-3 defeat. — AFP photo

Upset over Ottey

ATHLETICS

SYDNEY, Sept 16: A major fallout appears to be looming in the Jamaican athletics team just two days after manager Winston Ulett claimed all was sweet in his camp over whether sprint legend Merlene Ottey should run in the 100 metres at the expense of one of the first three from the trials, reports AFP.

The Ottey saga which has been simmering since the Jamaica National Championships in July, is threatening to boil over as the athletes prepare to face the rest of the world in the athletics which begins on September 22.

A source close to the Jamaican team said on Saturday that two members of the women's team may compete in individual events then withdraw from the games if they are replaced in the 100m by the woman known as the 'Lion Queen'.

However, Ulett, who on Thursday had told AFP that he believed Ottey had been a bit hysterical in some of her statements since the trials, said the threats were news to him and may be just a rumour.

"I am not aware of that. Never heard it before," said Ulett, although he did drop a large hint that Ottey would be selected at the expense of national champion Peta-Gaye Dowdie as he was concerned by her fitness.

According to the source, Tayna Lawrence, who was third at the trials and has been running consistently well in Grand Prix meets in Europe, is safe but Dowdie or runner-up Beverly McDonald could be asked to step aside to make way for 40-year-old Ottey.

Ottey, who only returned to the track in July after she had her two year ban imposed last year for testing positive for nandrolone quashed by the IAAF because of lack of evidence, has claimed that McDonald had offered her place in the trio — something which McDonald, last year's 200m

silver medalist at the world championships firmly denies.

Ottey, who ran fourth at the National Championships, is now the fastest of the four and has twice gone under 11 seconds since then, including a wind-aided 10.91. Ottey, the double sprint silver medalist from the 1996 games in Atlanta, has repeatedly said she will refuse to run the relay if an opening was not made for her in the 100m.

McDonald and Dowdie are not about to voluntarily give up their spots to anybody and have, according to the source, also threatened to withdraw from the sprint relay if they are replaced in the 100m.

The source said McDonald, the national 200m champion, if replaced, would run that event and then refuse to compete in 4x100m relay while Dowdie — who has not qualified for the 200m — will boycott the relays.

Ulett said that nothing has changed since the National Championships and the selectors would continue to be guided by two main criteria: position past the post and current form.

"Our position has not varied or changed since from the first day after the National Championships."

"We will decide on September 20 which three will run the 100 metres," he said.



ON A DIFFERENT LEVEL: Australian ace Ian Thorpe cutting his way through the waters during the heats of the 400 metres freestyle at the Sydney International Aquatic Centre yesterday. Thorpe shattered two world marks on the opening day of the swimming competition. — AFP photo

SYDNEY SIDELINES

SYDNEY, Sept 16 (AFP): World shot put champion CJ Hunter may have pulled out of the Olympics because of a knee injury but he is playing a vital role as his wife Marion Jones bids to win a unique five Olympic titles — as chef.

The 24-year-old Jones, who is competing in her first Olympics, said although she was sad because her and CJ had wanted to make the Olympics a family affair, he was making up for that disappointment by cooking her breakfast every morning.

"He made me the best scrambled eggs, bacon and toast this morning," the two-time world 100m champion said.

RECORD RATINGS

Unsurprisingly the Opening Ceremony for the Sydney Olympics broke all TV ratings records in Australia.

More than half the population — 10,436,000 people — are estimated to have watched Friday night's extravaganza on Seven, the channel that had exclusive broadcast rights for the Games in the host nation.

A measure of the success of the broadcast was a comparison with the funeral of Diana, Princess of Wales in 1997, which attracted 6,234,000 even though it was broadcast on four separate channels.

MOBILE PHONE FRENZY

Mobile phone traffic set records at Olympic Park during the opening ceremony, with spectators and athletes making a staggering 125,000 calls and spending the equivalent of nearly five months on the telephone.

Telstra said half a million mobile phone calls were recorded at Olympic Park Friday afternoon and evening.

People who made calls during the opening ceremony spent a total of 200,000 minutes — close to 20 weeks on the telephone — telling friends and family about the spectacle.

FOLLOWING ORDERS

Dara Torres, swimming in her fourth Olympics after a seven-year hiatus from the sport, kept a low profile in the heats of the 100m butterfly Saturday, while her fellow American Jenny Thompson and world record-holder Inge de Bruijn of the Netherlands traded Olympic records.

"I was told to take it easy," said Torres, 33, after she finished up with the fifth-fastest time of the morning to comfortably make the semifinals.

WHAT A RACQUET

A problem with internationally approved rubbers on table tennis racquets has resulted in four competitors failing the test for use in Olympic competition. Table tennis referee Phil Males said 25 racquets had been tested before competition started and four had failed the requirements for use in competition.

Table tennis has strict guidelines on the type and width of rubber permitted on a racquet and the type of glue used.

THOMPSON'S DOUBT

Double Olympic decathlon champion Daley Thompson has questioned Sebastian Coe's unofficial title as Britain's greatest-ever athlete.

Coe, who captured 1500 metres gold and 800m silver in Moscow and Los Angeles in 1980 and 1984, topped most of the lists of Britain's best athletes of the millennium.

Thompson, the 42-year-old gold medal winner in 1980 and 1984 was visiting a Media Centre in Sydney's Olympic complex when he said with a grin: "I hear you have to call him Lord Coe when you try speaking to him now."

"The establishment very much think he is, but let's face it. The man in the street, and me and you are the ones who really know who it is."

Coe, a former Conservative Member of Parliament, was made a peer earlier this year.

HEIGHT OF SUCCESS

The tallest female athlete at the Sydney Olympics is Polish basketball player Margo Dydek. The 6ft 11in (2.1m) centre plays in the WNBA in America for the Utah Starz where she once blocked nine shots in one game — a league record.

Basketball is not just the domain of giants, however. The smallest female athlete at the Olympics is 5ft 3in (1.6m) Australian point guard Kristi Harrower.

LAUSANNE CELEBRATES

Switzerland, the home of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), briefly topped the medal table after two events of

the Sydney Games after taking the gold and bronze medal.

Brigitte McMahon's unexpected gold medal — the 33-year-old is only ranked 21st in the world — was the surprise winner and it was a double celebration for the Swiss when Magali Messner came in for the bronze behind Australia's silver medalist Michelle Jones.

Messner's success would be particularly appreciated by IOC chiefs as she is a former Geology student of the University of Lausanne, the home of the world's most powerful sports governing body.

SYDNEY VS PARIS

Sydney may have its Harbour Bridge and breathtaking Opera House, but Paris is ready to take advantage of some of its own world-famous landmarks if its 2008 Olympics bid is successful.

Organisers are planning a dramatic final dash along the Champs Elysees for the marathon finish, emulating the climax to the Tour de France.

NO WAY KANGAROO FREE

Organisers of Friday night's Opening Ceremony had vowed the world's biggest show — with an estimated 3.7 billion television viewers around the planet — would be a Kangaroo and Koala free zone.

The decision had been taken to miss out on the Marsupials to prove that there was more to Australia than cuddly creatures.

But organisers had reckoned without the Australian team. Each team member had been provided with a bag of toy boxing kangaroos to hurl into the 110,000-strong crowd.

It all goes to prove that you just can't tie those Kangaroos down.

'Little Dynamo' means business

WEIGHTLIFTING

SYDNEY, Sept 16: Mighty mite Halil Mutlu of Turkey claimed his second consecutive Olympic weightlifting gold medal in world record fashion on Saturday, reports AFP.

Mutlu, nicknamed the "Little Dynamo", lived up to his raging favouritism by outclassing his opponents with a peerless performance in front of hundreds of flag-waving Turkish supporters.

The 1.50m (4ft 11 inch) tall Mutlu broke his own snatch, clean and jerk and overall world records in the 56kg category to add to the gold he won in Atlanta in the 54kg division.

The reigning World and European champion, and the 1999 lifter of the year, took the title with a total of 305kg (137.5kg and 167.5kg).

"It is a good feeling (to win again)," he said. "And a huge success to break all my world records."

Like Naim Suleymanoglu, who will go for an amazing fourth straight Olympic weightlifting gold on Sunday, Mutlu was born in Bulgaria before switching allegiance to Turkey, the land of their fathers. Their golden weightlifting ways have made them superstars in their adopted country.

Bulgaria's Ivan Ivanov, gold

medalist in the 52kg category at the 1992 Barcelona Olympics and a former world champion, claimed the silver with a total of 292.5kg (130kg and 162.5kg). Ivanov bent down and kissed the weights after clinching silver with his lift in the clean and jerk.

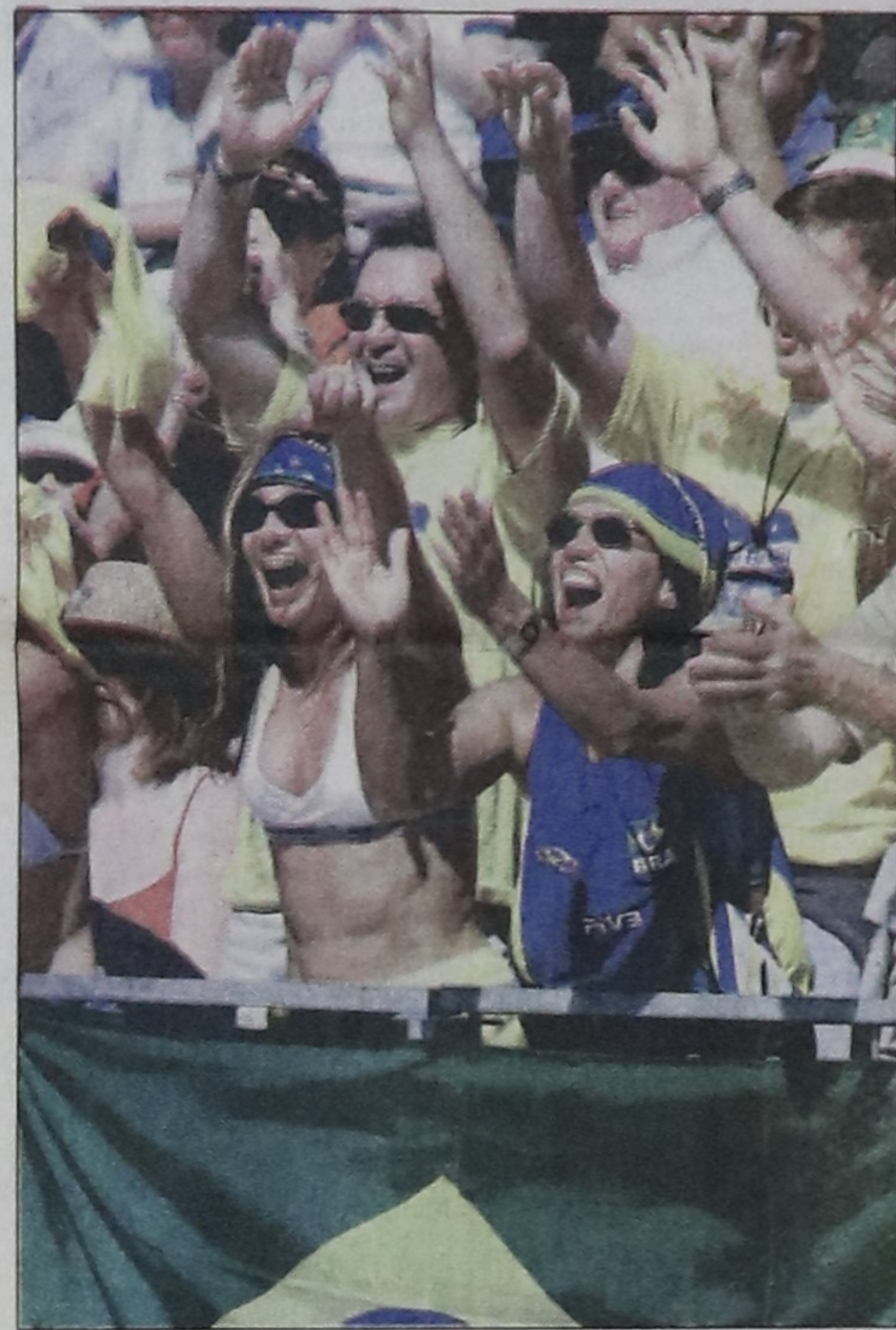
Third place went to 19-year-old Chinese Wu Wenxiong with a total of 287.5kg (125kg and 162.5kg). He beat compatriot Zhiang Xiangxiang, a silver medalist in Atlanta, to the bronze on lower body weight.

Mutlu capped a riveting performance by breaking the world records for the clean and jerk and total with a mighty effort. He punched the air with glee after hoisting 167.5kg, to break his clean and jerk mark by one kg. His new overall mark of 305kg bettered the old record by 2.5kg.

The only sour point of the night was when he failed to break the record again with a lift of 170kg.

Twenty-seven-year-old Mutlu, undefeated since 1995, displayed his near invincibility in the opening snatch division by breaking his own world record by 0.5kg with a power-packed lift of 138kg (although only 137.5kg counted to his total).

Mutlu, ever the showman, broke out in a big smile and blew kisses to the huge Turkish contingent at the venue.



SAMBA ON THE BEACH: Brazilian fans getting behind the country's women's beach volleyball team during their Sydney 2000 preliminary first round fixture against Cuba at Bondi Beach yesterday. Brazil cruised 15-4. — AFP photo

Happy to be here

SYDNEY, Sept 16: East Timorese weightlifter Martinho De Araujo made history Saturday when he became the first athlete from the impoverished former Indonesian territory to

WEIGHTLIFTING

compete at an Olympics, reports AFP.

Participating in the men's 56kg group B competition as an International Olympic Athlete (IOA) — East Timor is not officially a country yet — the diminutive lifter finished in a roundabout last place.

But in the finest Olympic tradition it really was the taking part that counted.

"I have gone through a lot of difficulty at home — today I lifted not only weights but my country as well," beamed the 25-year-old former school-teacher, who wore a plain white vest sporting the five Olympic rings.

"I am very happy to be here at the Olympics — I had hoped for a better result but in four years time at the Olympics I will be better."

Taking part in his first international contest, he failed miserably in his first two attempts to lift 65kg in the snatch category but then boldly moved up to 67.5kg and to the delight of the enthusiastic crowd held it comfortably.

Returning for the clean and jerk lift — and clearly rising to the occasion — he completed both his first two lifts before bowing out at 95kg.

His combined score of 157.5kg was 52.5kg behind the nearest competitor and well over 100kg less than the eventual winner Vitaly Derbenev of Bulgaria.

But with the exception of home favourite Mehmet Yagci it was De Araujo who got the loudest cheer, and most media attention, of the day.

Explaining his impromptu jig at Friday's parade of athletes during the opening ceremony, he said he had been unable to contain his delight at being part of the Games.

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HAIL HALIL: Turkey's Halil Mutlu showing his gold medal after setting a new world record in the men's 56kg weightlifting yesterday. — AFP photo