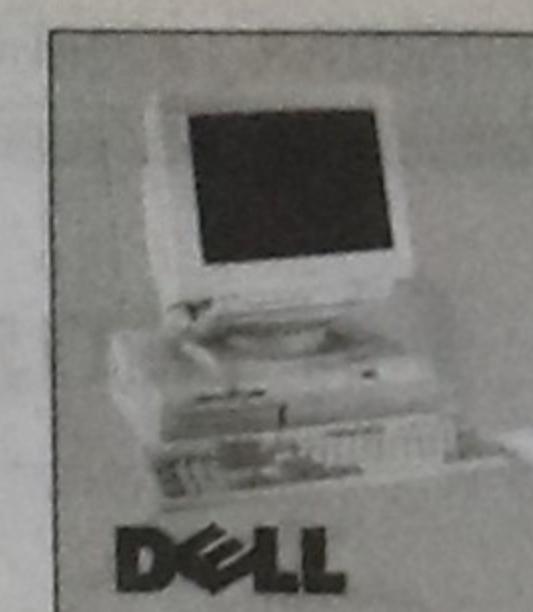


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Harmony in ceremony

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 terrible 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 Holloway 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.

— AFP photo



STOPPED BY THE EAGLES: Mark Viduka (C), the Australian forward, being marked by Nigeria's Godwin Opkara (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 well 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 about 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 Beverley 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.

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

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

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