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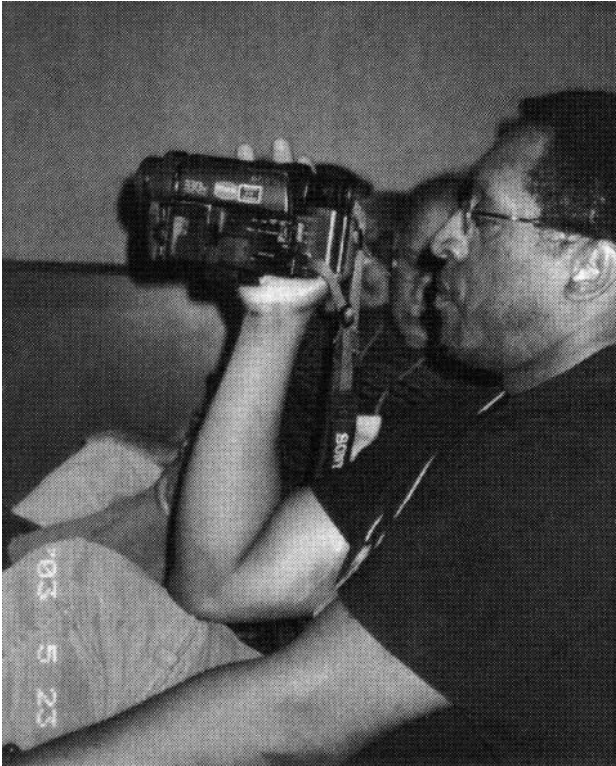
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Representations of Aborigines in Australian Sport: A Case Study of Cathy Freeman

Within the popular imagination, high performance competitive sport is a social institution that is founded on, and reinforces, social equality and harmony. This is particularly true of the Olympic Games, which promotes the Olympic ideals of peace, harmony, and friendship through competitive sport worldwide. From this utopian perspective, sport is a vehicle through which deep-rooted social conflicts are perceived to be symbolically resolved. Time and again, high profile sport figures, whether they are athletes or executives, comment on the idyllic nature of competition through print, radio, and television. For many people, divisive social issues such as race, gender, and class are seemingly and satisfactorily transcended on the playing field, while maintaining their critical social edge within broader society.

In recent years, sport historians have ably demonstrated how ideas about race, gender, and class are reinforced through competitive sport experiences. Their research shows how athletes have been, and continue to be, used to symbolically represent the resolution of difficult political conflicts concerning all three social categories. Such is the case with Australian track and field superstar Cathy Freeman, who is most well known for her Olympic victory in the 400m at the 2000 Summer Games in Sydney, Australia. This paper will examine how the media capitalized on Cathy Freeman's "difference" as an Aborigine in a way that promoted her as a "safe" public icon. In the case of Cathy Freeman, the advancement of race relations between "white" and "black" Australians as a whole was dependent upon the manner in

which she was assimilated into mainstream Australian sport culture by a predominantly white media. Both "white" and Aboriginal Australians were dependent on having Freeman constructed as an athletic heroine to provide a sense of comfort for the former and empowerment for the latter. Similarly, Freeman's representation in the media was one means by which legitimacy was lent to Indigenous participation in the games and for the unifying agenda of the Olympic movement. In addition to Freeman's role other areas of Indigenous involvement, such as the Festival of the Dreaming and the opening ceremony will be reviewed.



James Coates