Sydney 2000

The Games of the XXVII Olympiad
It was 11.15pm on a warm Sydney spring night in September. Aboriginal 400 metre runner Cathy Freeman, wearing a striking white lycra body suit, strode up onto the stage at the northern end of Sydney’s Olympic Stadium, the final bearer of the Olympic torch in 2000. She walked into a pond of water and bent down with her torch, lighting the submerged rim of the cauldron. The 110,000 strong crowd watched as the fiery rim rose around her. Still holding the torch high, she stood, bathed in a purple, blue and gold light, surrounded by the circular waterfall, looking out from behind a spectacular water curtain. The flaming cauldron - eight tonnes of gleaming stainless steel - then travelled up the side of the stadium where it was supported by a metal mast, and sat in its place of honour overlooking Sydney Olympic Park. Fireworks exploded across the city. The Games of the XXVII Olympiad had begun.

The ambitious fire and water lighting was the brainchild of Australian-born Olympic ceremonies director Ric Birch, a veteran of three previous Olympic ceremonies, and Sydney set designer and architect, Michael Scott-Mitchell. Australian Olympic Committee president John Coates had made the bold but risky choice of asking Australia’s most successful...
track athlete - and a hopeful gold medal winner in the same Games - to carry out the job.

The cauldron lighting was a dramatic end to the spectacular opening night of the Sydney Games which sought to show to the world a new vision of modern Australia - its mix of outback and sea, its history and its humour, its New World melting pot of people from around the globe and its unique Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture.

For Australians, debating issues of their own future, the ceremony sent a clear message of the importance of ‘reconciliation’ between the country’s largely European population, which began arriving by sea two centuries ago, and its indigenous population which have lived on the island continent for thousands of years.

In the ceremony itself, the theme of reconciliation was also symbolized in the picture of the two characters who appeared in its different segments - 13-year-old Sydney schoolgirl Nikki Webster in her pink beach dress, bow and shoes, and her flowing red hair holding hands with Aboriginal tribal dancer Djakapurra Munyarryun.

Some commentators likened the night to a giant Aboriginal corroboree. The ambitious ceremony, which involved a cast of almost 13,000 performers, a backstage crew of 4,600 and high tech gadgetry using 3.3 million watts of power, was the culmination of seven years of planning by Birch, who was signed up to do the ceremonies during the Sydney bid for the 2000 Games.

From the moment that Sydney was chosen at the International Olympic Committee Session in Monaco in September 1993, Birch wanted a striking method of lighting the cauldron - one which would go down in Olympic history in the same way as the flaming arrow which lit the one in Barcelona in 1992.

The ceremony began with a single horsemanship riding out into the stadium, wearing a brown outback hat and coat. The horse and his rider were soon followed by 120 other Australian stockhorses, each bearing the white Olympic flag with its five blue rings. The horsemen rode around a dusty, brown stadium floor which depicted the brown sweeping plains of the Australian outback in the biggest horse quadrille the world has ever seen.

Their ride epitomized the pioneering, horse riding spirit of famous Australian poems such as Banjo Patterson’s Man from Snowy River.

The flags were switched to the Australian flags as Australian band Human Nature and Julie Anthony sang a modern version of the Australian national anthem, ‘Advance Australia Fair’.

The scene then shifted to Hero Girl, pretty young schoolgirl - Nikki Webster - who arrived in the centre of the stadium, put sun cream on her nose, laid down her beach towel and began to dream of the ocean.

Her dream came to life as she awakened in Australia’s Barrier Reef. Suspended on wires 30 metres in the air - in a scene which exploited all three dimensions of the stadium, Webster found herself swimming in a giant tropical sea alongside gliding, giant pink jellyfish, brightly coloured tropical fish, stingrays and sea anemones.

Australian swimming coach, Laurie Lawrence, called at her from giant video screens around the stadium, urging her to swim faster.

The Aboriginal spirits then carried her to meet tribal dancer Djakapurra, the Songman, who led her into an Aboriginal dream time journey. He called up a new generation of spirits, drawn from the heart of the land by the women of the Central Desert. Indigenous people from Australia and the Torres Strait Islands were welcomed to the tune of tribal drum beats.

The stadium was filled with the distinctive Australian smell of burning Eucalyptus leaves in what became a corroboree of indigenous dance. Giant stilt walking spirits strode around as the ancestral creation spirit, Wandjina, a giant ochre and black face, rose like a sun over the
people, before falling to the ground. Wanjina started a raging bushfire, with two hundred fire breathers, 20 fiery stilt walkers and 40 others swinging flaming clubs entering the stadium, marching to the sounds of drums, recreating scenes of the fires that Aborigines have traditionally lit in Australia to regenerate growth in trees and plants.

After the fire cleared the earth, the rain came and the Australian landscape burst into life. Children dressed in red and green leaves rolled on the ground, the beginning of a segment devoted to celebrating Australian native plants. Red Sturt's desert peas, yellow wattles, water lilies, banksias and five giant red waratahs came together in a brilliant festival of flowers which had the crowd gasping.

The zany Tin Symphony segment depicted the arrival of European settlers in the late 18th century, including English explorer Captain James Cook and his sailors, and the development of Australia with metal and machinery. Giant figures of Ned Kelly, the famous Australian outlaw who become a folk hero, strode the stadium, wearing Kelly’s trademark black body armour. Kelly’s massive 16 metre tin horse - looking like a figure out of Salvador Dali painting - lurched around the scene, until Nikki Webster tamed it by giving him an apple. The history of white settlement was depicted with the emergence of metal agricultural machinery and giant metal wheels, sheep shearers and woodchoppers.

The story ended with a jibe at current Australian suburban life, as a team of people push their lawn mowers around - a reference to the great Australian suburban tradition of spending weekend afternoons moving the lawns.

The ‘Arrivals’ segment told the story of the arrival of different cultures to Australia - from all five Continents - Africa, Asia, the Americas, Europe and Oceania. They came together to form the five Olympic rings and then a massive mosaic map of Australia as Webster sang ‘Under Southern Skies’.

The final segment, ‘Eternity’, paid tribute to Australian workers, using some 700 tap dancers and performers dressed in jeans and working boots. Directed and choreographed by Nigel Triffitt and Dein Perry, who produced the musical Tap Dogs, the workers danced around a central metal construction site. A model of the Sydney Harbour bridge lit up with the words Eternity written across it, a reference to a word which was writ-
ten for many years in white chalk on Sydney streets by a reformed alcoholic, Arthur Stace. The Sydney 2000 Olympic Band, made up of 2,000 high school musicians from around the world then set the scene for the arrival of the athletes, playing Also Sprach Zarathustra, Chariots of Fire, Ode to Joy and Waltzing Matilda.

The night then saw a parade of more than 10,000 athletes and officials from 199 National Olympic Committees - and individual athletes from East Timor - led, in accordance with tradition, by the Greek team.

The parade of athletes broke new diplomatic ground by having the teams from the two Koreas marching together under the one blue and white Peninsula flag, and a small team from East Timor marching in white behind the Olympic flag.

The Australian team marched in last, its team of more than 500 athletes led by five-time Olympian, basketballer Andrew Gaze, whose family has been associated with the Olympics since the Melbourne Games of 1956. The team wore casual dress of loose fitting burnt orange jackets, yellow shirts and green pants and skirts - a sharp break from the conventional blue blazers they wore in Atlanta.

Singers John Farnham and Olivia Newton-John sang ‘Dare to Dream’, walking down through the athletes. His wife ill at home, President Samaranch had invited Australia’s best known Olympian, swimmer Dawn Fraser - a gold and silver medallist in three Olympics - to sit with him in the official box along with Prime Minister John Howard and his wife Jeannette, New South Wales Premier Bob Carr and his wife Helena, Olympics Minister Michael Knight and his wife Anne. The Games were formally opened by Governor General, Sir William Deane.

Vanessa Amorosi sang a haunting ‘Heroes Live Forever’ as the Olympic flag was raised.

Gold medal hockey player Rechelle Hawkes read the athletes’ oath while water polo official Peter Kerr read the judges’ oath. Tina Arena sang ‘The Name’ as the audience waited for the secret of the night - who would light the Olympic torch. The seven torch bearers in the stadium were all women - deliberately chosen to mark 100 years of women’s participation in the Olympics.

They began with Melbourne Olympics ‘Golden Girl’, four-time gold medal sprinter, Betty Cuthbert, being pushed in a wheelchair by three-time silver medallist sprinter Raelene Boyle. They passed the torch to Dawn Fraser who handed it to Shirley
Strickland-Delahunty, who won gold in the 80 metres hurdles and the 4x100 metre relay in Melbourne and gold in the hurdles in Helsinki in 1952. Munich Olympic swimming gold medallist, Shane Gould, took the torch and then passed it to the gold medallist in the 400 metres hurdles in Seoul in 1988, Debbie Flintoff-King, who ran up the centre of the athletes. Then the name that everyone had been waiting for was flashed on the screen as Cathy Freeman emerged from a sea of athletes, having done a quick change from her Australian team outfit into her lycra suit. The crowd roared. An Aboriginal woman - sprinter Nova Peris-Kneebone (a gold medallist in hockey in Atlanta) had been the first woman to run with the torch in Australia - at Uluru in June - and another Aboriginal Australian woman and fellow Olympian was the final torch bearer. President Samaranch later described the ceremony as the most beautiful of his 20 year presidency, saying he was deeply touched by the crowd’s enthusiastic reception for the athletes of North and South Korea marching together.

One Australian newspaper called it the ‘Night of Our Lives’, while Sydney’s Daily Telegraph dubbed Freeman’s torch lighting as ‘Our Finest Hour’.

The New York Times praised the ceremony for “a splendidly diverse and inclusive face Australia presented to the world”, the beginning of an Olympics which would “help shine a spotlight on Aboriginal culture and its historical plight.”

Commenting on the ceremony, its creator, Ric Birch said: “Times change, but this has to be an expression of the host city and must reflect its culture. It must reflect Sydney in 2000. I think we’ve done that.”

*Journalist, Sydney Morning Herald.
The joint parade of the athletes from South and North Korea.