Australian athletes returned from the Centennial Olympic Games held in Atlanta, Georgia between 19 July and 4 August 1996, with a record haul of forty-one medals. This easily eclipsed the twenty-seven medals won at Barcelona (the previous Australian record for an overseas Olympics) and the thirty-five medals won at the Melbourne Games in 1956. At the Atlanta Olympics Australia placed seventh on the national medal table behind the USA, Russia, Germany, China, France and Italy.  

Australia sent its largest and most expensive team ever to the 26th Olympiad—427 competitors, of which 171 (35 per cent) were women, a record high for female membership on an Australian Olympic team. Resides providing the richest Australian medal haul in Olympic history, the Atlanta Games once again showcased the remarkable sporting achievements of Australian women. Before the 1996 Games, women had constituted just over 20 per cent of the total membership of Australian Olympic teams, yet they had won 40 per cent (twenty-four from a total of sixty-one) of the gold medals awarded to Australian competitors. At the Atlanta Games, Australian women accounted for four of their nation’s nine (44 per cent) gold medals, five of the nine (56 per cent) silver medals and nine of the twenty-three (39 per cent) bronze medals. Overall, Australian women contributed eighteen (44 per cent) of Australia’s total of forty-one medals at the 1996 Olympic Games.  

Susie O’Neill (200m butterfly) accounted for the only individual gold medal won by an Australian woman at the Atlanta Games. Kate Slatter and Megan Still won gold in the coxless pairs. The ‘Hockeyroos’—the renowned Australian women’s hockey team-recorded their thirty-ninth consecutive victory when they defeated South Korea to collect the gold medal. Perhaps most inspiring of all, Wendy Schaeffer and Gillian Rolton both overcame major injuries to help earn a stunning gold medal victory in the equestrian Three-Day Team Event.  

Australian women were particularly prominent in the silver medal
count. Individual silver medallists included Cathy Freeman (400m), Petria Thomas (200m butterfly), Louise McPaul (javelin) and Michelle Ferris (cycling, sprint). In team events, the women’s 4 x 100m medley relay team (Nicole Stevenson, Sarah Ryan, Samantha Riley, Susan O’Neill) also won a silver medal.6

Australia won more bronze medals (twenty-three) at Atlanta than any other nation except Germany (twenty-seven) and the United States (twenty-five). Samantha Riley (100m breaststroke), Deserie Huddleston (shooting, double trap), and Lucy Tyler-Sharman (cycling, 24 km points race) won individual bronze medals for Australia. Team bronze medals were taken by the women’s 4 x 200m freestyle (Nicole Stevenson, Julia Greville, Emma Johnson, Susan O’Neill), the K2 500 kayak double (Anna Wood, Katrin Borchert), the lightweight double sculls (Rebecca Joyce, Virginia Lee), the beach volleyball team (Natalie Cook and Kerrie Pottharst), and the women’s basketball and softball teams.7

Australia’s medal pursuit at the 1996 Olympics got off to a slow and worrisome start. Before the Games began, sporting journalists and other self-appointed experts engaged in the usual pie-Olympic ritual of hyping expectations by predicting an unprecedented gold rush for Australia. Among seven leading sports journalists surveyed by the Sydney Morning Herald (SMH), on 15 July, six predicted an Australian gold medal total in excess of what the team would actually achieve. Only Peter Fitzsimons did not experience a rush of blood and, even in his case, three of his predicted five gold medal performers did not achieve the expected result.8

Given the level of unrealistic expectations that Australia carried into the Games, it was not surprising that disappointment set in quickly. On day two of the Olympics, Michael Klim, described by some news sources as ‘heavily fancied to win gold’, failed to make the final in the 200m freestyle. Daniel Kowalski won bronze in the event, but by the time Samantha Riley took ‘only bronze in the 100m breaststroke on day three and Kowalski placed third in the 400m freestyle, the Australian media had begun to panic over Australia’s ‘Olympic failure’.

Condemning the swimming team for its ‘bronze age mentality’, the press went on a witch hunt for those responsible for such a disaster. By day four of the Olympic Games, Australia was placed a lowly fifteenth on the national medal table, with one gold (Michael Diamond, shooting), no silver and five bronze medals. Preoccupied by what it saw
as a national disaster in the pool, the press largely ignored the fact that Australia had qualified more competitors in Olympic swimming finals at Atlanta than it had at the Barcelona Games in 1992.  

On the fifth day of competition the tide began to turn. The women’s 4 x 100m medley relay team (Stevenson, Riley, O’Neill and Ryan) took the silver medal and Scott Miller also won silver in the 100m butterfly. Russell Mark set an Olympic record to win gold in the double trap shoot. And there was inspiration aplenty when Wendy Schaeffer and Gillian Rolton combined with Phillip Dutton and Andrew Hoy to win a gold medal for Australia in the equestrian Three-Day Event. Schaeffer, who bubbled with excitement during the presentation ceremony, competed with pins in a broken leg. For her part, forty-year-old Rolton, a member of the Barcelona gold medal team in the same event, turned in a heroic display in the cross-country when she was twice thrown and, despite a broken collar-bone and broken ribs, twice remounted to finish the round. On day five Australia jumped to ninth on the medal table and the carping about the team’s performance began to dissipate. Meanwhile, the women’s hockey, softball and basketball teams all continued their long and steady campaign toward their respective Olympic finals.

Despite the predictions of doom, the first week of the 1996 Olympic Games ended on a high note for Australia when first the women’s 4 x 200m freestyle team (Stevenson, Greville, O’Neill, Johnson) took the bronze medal, then Susie O’Neill and Petria Thomas won gold and silver respectively in the 200m butterfly. This was followed by the gold and silver medal performances of Kieren Perkins and Daniel Kowalski in the 1500m freestyle and bronze medal success by the men’s 4 x 100m medley relay team. Suddenly, humiliating ‘failure’ had been transformed into stunning success as the 1996 Australian Olympic swimming team finished with an additional extra gold, silver and bronze medal to the total achieved by the 1992 Barcelona Games’ swimming team.

In the 200m butterfly, O’Neill and Thomas ‘saved Australian swimming’ when they beat Ireland’s triple gold medallist Michelle Smith into third place. For his part, Perkins, who only qualified for the final by a fingernail, swam a brilliant race from lane eight to cap Australia’s swimming campaign with another gold medal. In what one newspaper called ‘the greatest day in Australian swimming since 1956’, Kowalski followed Perkins to collect the silver in the 1500m freestyle,
adding to the two bronze medals he had already won in the 200m and 400m freestyle earlier in the week.\(^{12}\)

At the end of the first week of the Games, public attention was diverted from the competition as Atlanta shuddered under the impact of a pipe bomb that exploded in the middle of a crowd gathered at Olympic Park. One person died and more than 100 were injured. This prompted Australian officials to review their security plans for the 2000 Games amid forecasts of a ‘fortress Sydney’ at the next Olympics. Both Atlanta and the International Olympic Committee appeared eager not to let the tragedy delay the Games. Track and field competition began on schedule and ran without interruption.\(^{13}\)

Australia has always relied disproportionately on its women athletes in Olympic track and field competition. Since World War II, Australia has won only fourteen gold medals in Olympic track and field events and women have won eleven (78 per cent). Historically, the names that shine most brightly for Australia in Olympic track and field are the names of women: Shirley Strickland, Betty Cuthbert, Marjorie Jackson, Glynnis Nunn, Debbie Flintoff-King, etc. Among Australia’s many distinguished male athletes, only J A Winter (high jump, 1948), Herb Elliot (1500m, 1960), and Ralph Doubell (800m, 1968) have won Olympic track and field gold medals.

Australia won no gold medals in track and field events at the Atlanta Games, but Cathy Freeman (400m) and Louise McPaul (javelin) each won a silver medal. There were no Australian male silver medallists and no Australian bronze medallists, male or female, in Olympic track and field events in 1996.

Louise McPaul collected Australia’s first athletics medal at Atlanta and this nation’s first ever medal in the javelin when, on her last throw, she hurled the spear 65.54 metres to take second behind Finland’s Heli Rantanen (67.94m).\(^{14}\) Meanwhile, Cathy Freeman progressed through the heats in the 400m as she prepared for one of the most memorable match-ups of the 1996 Olympic Games. In the 400m final on day ten of competition, Freeman ran a brilliant race to finish second behind the remarkable Marie-Jose Perec of France. Freeman cut almost a second off her previous personal best to finish in 48.63 seconds, a time which would have won any other Olympic final in history. Perec won the race in 48.25s, thus becoming the first athlete to claim consecutive Olympic gold medals in the 400m. Six runners broke 50 seconds, making this the
fastest 400 metres race for women ever recorded. Nigeria’s Falilat Ogunkoya was third in 49.10s.\(^{15}\)

By the time Freeman and McPaul had added silver medals to the team’s tally, the Australian press—so recently lamenting the nation’s ‘failure’—was now gloating over an unprecedented ‘gold rush’.\(^{16}\) Megan Still and Kate Slatter took the gold medal in the coxless pairs, beating the Americans in a photo finish. Michelle Ferris, at nineteen the youngest member of Australia’s track cycling team, unexpectedly won a silver medal in the women’s sprint. Beach volleyballers Natalie Cook and Kerri Pottharst defeated the American team 12-11 and 12-7 in a bronze medal match lasting more than two hours. Australia moved to fifth on the medal table behind only the US, Russia, France and China.\(^{17}\)

The news was not all good, of course. Hayley Lewis, one of Australia’s great swimming champions, found the going difficult at Atlanta. Samantha Riley, favoured by some to win the gold medal in the 200m breaststroke, finished fourth. The victories of the cycling team were somewhat overshadowed by the long-running dispute between coach Charlie Walsh and defending Barcelona gold medallist Kathy Watt over selection for the individual pursuit race.\(^{18}\) In athletics, the women’s 4 x 100m women’s relay team (Sharon Cripps, Kylie Hanigan, Lawren Hewitt, Jodi Lambert) qualified for the final, but the 4 x 400m relay team (Lee Naylor, Kylie Hanigan, Melinda Gainsford-Taylor, Renee Poetschka) ran into terrible trouble on the final baton change and were eliminated.\(^{19}\)

However, the disappointments were more than balanced by the successes. American-born Lucy Tyler-Sharman, caught in the middle of the Walsh/Watt dispute, overcame her disappointment at being excluded from the individual pursuit to win a bronze medal in the 24 km points race.\(^{20}\) Deserie Huddleston took bronze in shooting (double trap). Television journalist and part-time model Rebecca Joyce combined talents with Virginia Lee to win bronze in the women’s lightweight double sculls. Still on Lake Lanier, Anna Wood and Katrin Borchert took the bronze medal in the K2 500 on the last day of Olympic competition.\(^{21}\)

Meanwhile, both the women’s softball and basketball teams had reached the finals. Veteran softball great, thirty-seven-year-old Joyce Lester, led her team to a third place finish in the scorching Georgia heat. Not to be outdone, the Opals (the Australian women’s basketball team), guided by captain Robyn Marr, star guard Michelle Tims, Sandy Brondello
and Michelle Brogan, went into overtime to defeat an aggressive and spiteful Russia 74-70. On the last day of Olympic competition, the United States defeated Brazil for the gold medal in women’s basketball and the Opals beat Ukraine 66-56 to achieve bronze, Australia’s first ever Olympic medal in basketball. Michelle Brogan led the way in the final game with nineteen points and twelve rebounds.  

Before the Games much was expected of the Hockeyroos, Australia’s world champion women’s hockey team. On the fourteenth day of Olympic competition—the day Michael Johnson (USA) became the first man in Olympic history to win the 200m and 400m sprint double—the Hockeyroos defeated South Korea 3-1 to win Australia’s second last gold medal of the Atlanta Games. Alyson Annan became the first woman to score two goals in an Olympic hockey final, but she gave the credit to a solid team effort led by captain Rechelle Hawkes, teammates Liane Tooth, Jacqui Pereira, Nova Peris, Katrina Powell (who scored the third goal against Korea) and all the other members of a closely-knit unit guided by veteran coach Ric Charlesworth. The team unity and collective sacrifice of the women’s hockey team symbolised the best traditions of Australian sport and this gold medal seemed a fitting climax to Australia’s campaign at the 1996 Olympic Games.

While those who won medals received the bulk of press attention, there were many other memorable stories from Atlanta. Ryde swimmer Nadine Neumann had recovered from a broken neck to not only make the Olympic team but finish sixth in the 200m breaststroke final in a personal best time. On the track, twenty-nine-year-old Margaret Crowley became the first Australian woman since Jenny Orr (Munich, 1972) to make an Olympic or world championship final in the metric mile. Finishing fifth in that final, Crowley became the most successful Australian female 1500m runner in Olympic history and the best-performed athlete on the Olympic track in 1996 apart from Cathy Freeman. Bubbling with excitement at the end of her race, Crowley said, ‘Fifth in the Olympic Games is beyond my wildest dreams. Everyone wants to win ... but there’s nothing like being a participant in the Games. Whether its first, fifth or last, as long as you give it your best shot.’

Perhaps sponsors, who seem to notice only the glitter of gold, should take more notice of the championship qualities of a Margaret Crowley or a Nadine Neumann. Certainly Crowley’s attitude (along with that of Shane Kelly who displayed composure and courage in the
face of disappointment when his foot slipped out of his pedal strap ending his chances for cycling gold), contrasted vividly with that of Clint Robinson who placed third in the K1 1000. Obviously distraught that he was unable to repeat his 1992 gold medal performance, Robinson’s response made the bronze medal seem more like a prison sentence than a top three placing in the fastest race in the history of his event. Observing this and the unfortunate condemnation of the Australian press of their own ‘bronzed Aussies’, one must ask if we have so exaggerated the importance of winning and so devalued the significance of silver and bronze medals that we must just as well forget about second and third placing and award only the gold.

Even before the closing ceremony at Atlanta, the time honoured practice of hyping Australian expectations for the next Olympics had begun. AOC President John Coates confidently predicted sixty medals, including twenty gold (a 30 per cent jump in overall performance and a 120 per cent increase in gold medals) for the Sydney Games. Given our dismal record for predicting Olympic outcomes, why do we insist on placing unwarranted pressure on our own athletes by making dubious predictions four years before the event? In Coates’s case, one obvious reason was money, Fearful that pending Federal Budget cuts by the new Coalition Government might compromise funding for elite sport, Coates argued that ‘money means medals’. By linking the overall success of the Sydney Olympics to the individual success of Australian Olympians in the year 2000, Coates hoped to avoid the August Budget axe that cut a swathe through the arts, education, the public service and Aboriginal support programs.

Over the next four years, the Australian Government will spend several hundred million dollars to assure the success of Australian athletes at the Sydney Olympics. As far as women athletes are concerned, we have certainly come a long way since the days when women were expected to raise money to fund their own way to the Games. Historically, women have overcome innumerable barriers to their participation in sport. At the Olympics they have fought a long battle for equality of opportunity and, at the same time, they have shoulered a disproportionate share of our national sporting expectations. The struggle for equality of opportunity is far from over. Who among the Australian women medallists at the 1996 Olympic Games will receive anything like the endorsements, commercial offers and financial opportunities of a
Kieren Perkins? Yet, through it all, Australian women Olympians continue to prove themselves the best of the best. As John Coates himself put it on the eve of the 1992 Olympics, When it comes to the Olympic Games, women are our greatest success story’. 27

NOTES:
3 See Phillips, Australian Women at the Olympic Games, p. 6: Harry Gordon, Australia and the Olympic Games, UQP, Brisbane, 1994, p. xxiii.
4 I have credited the mixed (two women and two men) Three-Day Event equestrian team in the women’s gold medal total.
5 The male members of the victorious equestrian team were Andrew Hoy and Philip Dutton. Individual gold medals at Atlanta were also won by Kieren Perkins (1500m freestyle), Michael Diamond (shooting, men’s trap), and Russell Mark (shooting, double trap). Men’s team gold medals were won by the ‘Oarsome Foursome’ — Nicholas Green, Michael McKay, James Tomkins, Drew Ginn (men’s coxless fours) and by Mark Woodford and Todd Woodbridge (tennis, men’s doubles).
6 Only two Australian men won individual silver medals at Atlanta — Daniel Kowalski (1500m freestyle) and Scott Miller (100m butterfly). Team silver medals were won by men in the coxless pairs and the tornado class yachting.
7 Individual men’s bronze medals went to Daniel Kowalski (200m and 400m freestyle), Scott Goodman (200m butterfly), Brad McGee (cycling, individual pursuit), Stuart O’Grady (cycling, 40 km point race), Stefan Botev (weight lifting) and Clint Robinson (canoeing, K1 1000). Men’s team bronze medals were won by men’s hockey, the 4 x 100m medley relay (swimming), the 4000m pursuit (cycling), lightweight double sculls (rowing), quadruple sculls (rowing), star class (yachting) and the K2 500 (kayak double).
8 ‘How many golds will Australia win? — The Herald’s experts make their predictions’. SMH, 15 July 1996.
9 That sinking feeling’, Weekend Australian. 27-8 July 1996.
11 It seemed too easily forgotten that at the Barcelona Games only Kieren Perkins (1500m freestyle) won an individual gold medal in swimming for Australia.
17 See various reports in SMH, 29 July 1996.
23 ‘Aussies overwhelm South Korea’, *Weekend Australian*, 3-4 Aug. 1996; ‘Sticking to Goals’, *Time*, 12 Aug. 1996, Australia’s final gold medal at Atlanta was won by Mark Woodforde and Todd Woodbridge in the men’s doubles tennis.