

# ABC Audio Studios | Fierce Girls podcast

Cathy Freeman – the girl who ran fast

<https://www.abc.net.au/radio/programs/fierce-girls/cathy-freeman-the-girl-who-ran-fast/9485914>



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If you're an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person, we want to let you know that this episode of Fierce Girls contains the name of someone who has died.

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There was no way a brown-skinned blow-in was going to take any medals away from the white girls that day.

It didn't matter who crossed the line first.

The self-important officials, with their matching tracksuits and whistles, had no plans to reward an unknown Aboriginal girl – no matter how good she was.

It was an unspoken understanding between them.

It was unfair.

It was also racist. That meant it was a decision based on the crazy belief that some people were better and deserved more than others, simply because of where they came from, or the colour of their skin. Outrageous.

So, when Catherine Freeman clearly won four of out five events at the country zone athletics titles, she was forced to step back as the second placegetters received medals.

Catherine, the rightful winner and too shy to cause a fuss, slunk home with a couple of slapdash, crumpled certificates.

Her stepdad and coach, Bruce, was fuming!

“Don’t worry,” he said. “Nobody can take away the fact you won those races fair and square.”

Despite being ripped off, 10-year-old Catherine wasn’t particularly bummed.

She dealt with racism the best way she knew how - by shying away from crowds of people and wearing a cap with the brim pulled down over her face.

She grew up thinking all white people were millionaires. They all seemed to live on hills in brick houses with carpets and phones.

But other than their apparent piles of money, Catherine didn’t feel white people were that different from her.

That was, until she was teased.

“Eww, yuck! You eat witchetty grubs!”

Aside from the fact witchetty grubs are packed with protein and taste like almonds, some kids were just jerks.

They were trying to be mean, but what they didn’t know was that Catherine didn’t feel like she had much of a connection to Aboriginal culture at all back then.

Her grandmother was one of the Stolen Generations - they were Aboriginal children taken from their families.

The government would send police or scary officers out to snatch them away because they thought they should be living like white people.

They were sent far away – and they could never go home.

Catherine's grandmother was taken from her mum when she was eight.

She wasn't allowed to speak Aboriginal languages, she wasn't allowed to tell Dreaming stories, and she wasn't allowed to eat bush tucker.

She became a kinked link in a chain made up of thousands of years of awesome Aboriginal tradition.

But there was at least one super skill passed down between generations in the Freeman family: Speed.

Catherine and her three brothers were runners. Not just any runners, but Australian tiger beetles – the fastest of the fast.

They were so speedy, none of their cousins stood a chance in their barefoot games of chasey.

They all raced against each other in the dried-up riverbed out the back of the house, but Catherine had the most determination.

After those nasty small-fry sports carnival-types denied Catherine her medals, she took a piece of paper and wrote on it in big letters:

I AM THE WORLD'S GREATEST ATHLETE.

Catherine thought that if she woke up every day and looked at that home-made poster on her bedroom wall, the words would seep into her brain and by some mixture of woo-woo magic and hard work, the statement would one day come true.

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“Catherine, wake up!” her mum yelled. “You have to train!”

Catherine opened one eye and looked at the poster on her wall.

I AM THE WORLD'S GREATEST ATHLETE.

Nup. Not even her magic poster was cutting it that morning.

“Catherine, wake up!”

She rolled over and groaned.

“No, Mum. I don’t want to do this anymore.”

Her mum thundered in and pulled back the covers.

“Listen here,” she said.

“Think of Anne Marie.”

“You’ve got two good arms and two good legs, now use them!”

Anne Marie was Catherine's older sister. She didn't run around with the rest of the family because... well... she couldn't.

Anne Marie had a severe form of cerebral palsy – a condition that meant she couldn't walk or talk.

Just before Catherine was born, her mum was told she would have to put Anne Marie in permanent care in a hospital more than three hours away from where the rest of the family lived.

They only got to visit four times a year, but they loved her and missed her terribly in between trips.

The morning her mum got cranky at her for not getting out bed and compared her to Anne Marie, was the very last morning Catherine ever dared to complain about training again.

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"Catherine, wake up!" It was Bruce this time.

He was standing in front of the bunk beds, holding a newspaper and beaming.

Catherine snatched it from him and scanned the small print.

There it was: 'Catherine Freeman: Women's 100 metre relay.'

She'd made it. At just 16, Catherine had been chosen to run for Australia at the 1990 Commonwealth Games in New Zealand.

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The baton change was textbook perfect.

Catherine ran with all her might towards the last runner in the team - Kerry Johnson, the fastest woman in Australia.

In the blink of an eye, Kerry's outstretched hand was within reach. Catherine passed her the baton and Kerry took off.

No one was catching her. Catherine jumped for joy as she crossed the line first.

Her team had won.

Journalists surrounded them. Cameras flashed. Microphones jostled in front of her face. Catherine was hammered with questions about being Aboriginal.

They called her 'Cathy', much to her family's disgust, and asked her how she felt about the honour.

"Being Aboriginal means everything to me," she said. "So many of my friends have the talent but lack the opportunity."

The answer made Catherine long for her friends and family at home.

Just a few days later, they were reunited, watching a replay of the now-famous race on television.

But the celebration quickly turned into the worst day of Catherine's life.

The phone rang.

Bruce answered. His face dropped.

Anne Marie had died. It was an asthma attack.

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Anne Marie was laid to rest with Catherine's souvenir Commonwealth Games flower posey.

At that devastating moment, Catherine vowed to run every race, forever after, in honour of her sister.

And she became more focused than ever on winning another gold.

An Olympic gold.

For Anne Marie.

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The last call for the women's 400 metre final came over the speaker.

Catherine took a deep breath and made her way to the track.

The crowd was frantic, but it was just a dull hum in the back of her mind. Her focus was on her lane and nothing else.

She unzipped her jacket, revealing a shimmering white hooded outfit that clung to her body from the tip of her toes to the top of her head.

“Ooooooh,” everyone marvelled.

It was called a swift suit. No one else was wearing one. A sportswear company had designed it especially for Catherine. It was supposed to increase her speed, but she was so confident she felt like she could’ve run in a tutu, pyjamas, and gumboots.

“Cathy Freeman, Australia!”

The announcer’s call sliced through her stillness. She raised her hands and clapped twice above her head.

Then she refocused.

She moved to the blocks and placed her fingertips on the starting line.

“On your marks, set....”

BANG!

Catherine leapt as the gun burst.

The only way she could lose was if she made a mistake.

“Stick to the plan,” she told herself, over and over again.

She stayed freakishly calm as her outstretched legs soared through the air.

She’d lost races before by sprinting too hard, too early, but this time she was cautious.

She was moving mechanically, like her body was a custom-made machine built to do nothing but run.

At 300 metres Catherine still had plenty of fuel to burn. It was now or never.

She caught her last glimpse of the other runners and made her move.

When the finish line was in sight, Catherine surged ahead with more force than she’d ever known.

She didn’t even feel like she was running anymore. She was floating – powered by the energy of her family, her ancestors... every kid who’d ever run barefoot in a game of chasey.

Catherine’s ears suddenly opened to the surroundings. The yelling was the most intense sound she’d ever heard.

Everyone in the crowd was on her side. She was carrying the hopes of an entire country... and an entire country was carrying her across the finish line.

The roar grew louder.

She did it.

She finished with a gap of five metres between her and the second placegetter.

Catherine Freeman had won an Olympic gold medal in front of an adoring home crowd in Sydney, Australia.

She always thought she'd have cried when it happened, but she didn't.

Instead, she sat down on the track, overcome with a sense of relief.

A slideshow of still-frames from Catherine's life flashed before her eyes and ended with a beautiful picture of Anne Marie.

She was warmed by the feeling of her sister's presence.

Catherine smiled and rose to standing.

Aboriginal and Australian flags were dotted all across the stadium.

She asked people to throw them on the ground, grabbing both flags at the same time so no one thought she was showing preference to one over the other.

Catherine wanted to symbolise solidarity between Aboriginal people and the rest of Australia. Never again would a brown-skinned kid be denied the same opportunities as everyone else.

She draped the flags together around her neck and waved them in the air as she ran a victory lap.

And she giggled to herself as her words rang true, if just for a moment:

'I AM THE WORLD'S GREATEST ATHLETE.'

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