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Cathy Freeman, the last to hold the flame before the lighting of the cauldron at Sydney's Olympic stadium in 2000, was the first to carry the Athens torch on its journey to the world's Olympic cities.

"I'm really proud, very proud to be here today carrying the flame and hopefully uniting the world." Cathy said.

Swimmer Susie O'Neill said her hands shook from the excitement of holding it, describing her relay leg as more moving than winning her Olympic gold medal.

Dual Olympic gold medalist Kieren Perkins, who held the Olympic torch aloft on top of Sydney's Harbour Bridge on Friday was almost lost for words describing the experience.

"It was awesome, unbelievable. You can throw all those adjectives in, but at the end of the day you can't explain how I felt," Perkins said.

It was the same for winter Olympian Zali Steggall who passed the flame to Perkins.

"I got teary. At this time last year I was coming out of hospital with my newborn son and this is the anniversary of that," Steggall said. "It doesn't get much better than this.

Steve Waugh, Australian of the Year and former National cricket captain, said he wished he could have been an Olympian after lighting the Olympic cauldron at Homebush.

"That was very nerve-racking running up there and lighting the flame," said Waugh outside the Olympic stadium. It's a massive honour. It's a huge thrill today and in some ways I wish I was an Olympian. To get that sort of buzz out of running the torch relay, imagine what it's like to actually compete in the Olympics. It really makes me proud to be Australian and run the torch relay today and to light the flame. It's something I'll never forget."

Olympic aerial skier Lydia Ierodiaconou became the first of 133 torchbearers, carrying the flame on the first leg of its 60km journey in and around Melbourne.

"I am involved in a sport that gets the adrenalin flowing, but today was more exciting than anything I have done on skis. It was the best start to a day I can remember."

Melbourne-born Vasso Apostolopoulos, a woman whose pioneering medical research has saved countless lives said it was a lifetime highlight. Named by Time Magazine as the most significant Greek abroad, Vasso was still wearing her relay uniform hours after she ran.

"It was the best feeling I've ever had in my life." Ms Apostolopoulos said.

Basketballer Andrew Gaze played one of his more memorable Olympic roles, bringing down the curtain on the Australian leg of the Athens Games Torch relay.

"Any time you have the chance to share in an Olympic moment its great," Gaze said. "But this is one of the best." Gaze, a four-time Olympian accepted the flame from his father Lindsay, who was involved in basketball in nine Olympic Games.

In the centre of a city full of flag-waiving goodwill, Alex Andrianopoulos, a politician of Greek descent, passed the Olympic flame to Ron Barassi, a Melbourne sporting legend, whose origins are clearly Italian, while Chinese-born Lord Mayor John So delivered a welcome speech.

If the organisers of the Olympic torch relay wanted one scene that demonstrated the ideals of friendship and peace the flame is meant to represent, they got it today.