

For Billy Mills, 75, the brave run continues

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In an instant, he became a legend.

But that one moment at Tokyo's Olympic Games – when America's Billy Mills pulled off one of the greatest upsets in sports history – was the byproduct of an extremely long process.



Billy Mills raises his arms in triumph as he wins the 10,000 meters at the 1964 Olympics. Mills, 75, is scheduled to speak at the Gathering of Nations here this weekend. (The Associated Press File)

“It was all part of the journey,” Mills said. “And that journey continues.”

When Mills won the Olympic 10,000 meters on Oct. 14, 1964, it was the culmination of incredible sacrifice and struggle in a country he says wasn’t ready to accept an American Indian champion.

“In college, racism was breaking me,” Mills, who is in New Mexico this week, told the **Journal** on Tuesday. “I came so, so close to suicide. It wasn’t the University of Kansas; I had a great support system at Kansas. It was America.”

Mills had three speaking engagements Wednesday in Taos and is slated to speak at the Gathering of Nations this weekend in Albuquerque. On Friday, he is being honored at a banquet in Albuquerque presented by the New Mexico Haskell Club.

Mills, 75, is an alum of Haskell Indian Nations University in Lawrence, Kan., having attended the institution when it was a high school.

“It’s just awesome that one of our classmates made it big time, and we all get to see each other this week,” said Cochiti Pueblo’s Judy Suina, a former classmate of Mills’ at Haskell. “Billy was just a great friend to everyone. We were all like brothers and sisters.”

Mills, a member of the Lakota Tribe, was born in Pine Ridge, S.D., and raised on an impoverished reservation.

He became an orphan at age 12, but says he hears – and feels – his father’s words to this day.

He took up running at Haskell “because I wasn’t any good at other sports” but was cut from the freshman team. The next three years, however, he had a record-breaking high school career.

Mills – also known as Makata Taka Hela – then headed to the University of Kansas on scholarship and became an NCAA All-America cross-country runner and member of KU’s 1959 and 1960 outdoor national championships teams. Yet, he felt like an outsider.

“When I made All-American,” he said, “there was more than one occasion when a photographer asked me to get out of the picture. I really contemplated suicide. But I felt a voice under my skin saying, ‘Don’t.’ I felt it was my dad. He would always tell me – not in these exact words – that I had to train to heal a broken soul. I knew I was broken.”

A number of world records soon would be, as well.

Mills joined the U.S. Marines after graduating college and became a first lieutenant. But he continued to train and pursue the goals he set at KU.

“I wanted to make the Olympic team,” he said. “I’d go back to class, open a psychology-I book, and it said, ‘The subconscious mind cannot tell the difference between reality and imagination. Your subconscious will have the body try to respond equally to both.’ I read that over and over again, and I thought, ‘All I have to do is imagine winning the gold medal at the Olympic Games.’ I started to imagine that over and over again, hundreds of times a day, thousands of times a week.”

Along with intense physical training, the imagery became reality.

In one of the greatest moments in Olympic history, Mills, Australian world-record holder Ron Clarke and Tunisia’s Mohammed Gammoudi headed to the final lap of the 10,000 meters in Tokyo with a shot to win. On the backstretch, while lapping other runners, the leaders tangled and Mills stumbled.

“All of our moves were legal, but we were pushing each other all over the place,” he said.

What happened next reads like a script from a motion picture. Which in fact, it is. In 1983, the movie “Running Brave” was made about Mills’ life and that race.

After the jostling settled, Gammoudi was in command, with Clarke giving chase. Mills had faded. But suddenly down the final stretch, Mills broke to the outside – and broke the world record.

“There was a runner we had lapped, and I saw an eagle on his jersey,” Mills said. “I could hear my dad say, ‘Wings of an eagle.’ ... I thought, ‘I may never be this close again. I’ve got to do it now.’”

In the final 30 meters, Mills displayed a mesmerizing burst of speed.

“As I broke the tape, I told the official I have to find the German athlete with the eagle on his jersey that helped me win,” he said. “I found him and there was no eagle. It was just a powerful perception.”

And a moment Suina says she and her classmates will never forget.

“We were all crying, it was so exciting, so emotional,” she said of watching on TV. “At that time we didn’t have Facebook. We did have smoke signals,” she said with a laugh. “Everyone was on the phone calling each other, and it was like a spider web the way the message spread.”

Mills told the **Journal** he had one other key thought during his final burst. “I was thinking ‘I’m going to win, but I may not get to the tape first.’ I didn’t know what it meant. But after a couple of years went by, I realized I had healed the broken soul at that moment – that was what I was going to win, even though I may not break the tape first.

“But in this case, I healed the broken soul – and I also won the race.”

And the hearts of the world.