

nha

Sam Gardner

FOX Sports

JUL 03, 2014 3:46P ET



Photo courtesy of Billy Mills

Billy Mills savors his triumph in Tokyo.

One does not need to spend long with Billy Mills to understand the significance of spirituality in the legendary distance runner's life.

As the 76-year-old Mills celebrates the 50-year anniversary of one of the most unlikely gold-medal upsets in Olympic history, it's clear how important the virtues and values learned growing up in the Lakota tribe were in bringing him from the brink of suicide to the top of his sport.

A member of the Oglala Lakota Sioux born to a white mother and Native American father on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, Mills struggled with his identity from a young age.

"The full-blood and the white would both refer to me as not belonging to either culture," Mills said this week in a phone interview with FOX Sports. "The full-blood referred to me as mixed-blood, and the white would refer to me as Indian."

Grappling with that uncertainty about his own heritage and where he belonged was only made more difficult by the death of his mother before his 8th birthday and Mills' father's death when Mills was 12.

Eventually, Mills found running, first as a teenager at the Haskell Institute -- a tribal school in Lawrence, Kansas -- and then at the University of Kansas, where he was an All-American cross-country runner. And though it couldn't rid him of the pain he lived with on a daily basis, athletics gave him an outlet through which he could escape the difficulties of life back home on the reservation.

**"MY DAD WOULD TELL ME HOW HE HAD TO LOOK BEYOND HURT AND HATE AND JEALOUSY, SELF-PITY, AND HOW THOSE EMOTIONS DESTROY YOU."**

*Billy Mills*

"My dad would tell me how he had to look beyond hurt and hate and jealousy, self-pity, and how those emotions destroy you," Mills said. "He told me that I needed a dream and that the pursuit of a dream empowers you."

Finding a passion did not necessarily lend itself to the acceptance Mills sought, however, and there were times when he was ready to abandon his Olympic aspirations.

One notable breakdown came during his junior year at Kansas, when Mills retreated to his hotel room, stood on a chair and told himself to jump out his fourth-floor window after being asked by a photographer to step out of a photo of Mills' white teammates following a track meet — an all-too-common occurrence that, Mills says, finally broke him that day.

Another time, after a similar incident at another meet, Mills told his wife, Pat, to be ready to tackle him if he got out of bed and headed

Another time, after a similar incident at another meet, Mills told his wife, Pat, to be ready to wake him if he got out of bed and headed toward the window that night.

“But then I felt the energy in my body,” Mills said, “and I heard my dad’s voice say, ‘Don’t.’”

*Photo courtesy of Billy Mills*

A beaming Billy Mills in 1964.

Inspired by what he felt was his father’s attempt to communicate with him, Mills decided to recommit himself to his pursuit of an Olympic gold medal, and after a stint in the Marine Corps, he began training for the 1964 Games.

During his Marine Corps commission, Mills learned that he was hypoglycemic and changed his diet to give himself more energy during races. He also challenged himself against some of the best runners in the world, running alongside Ron Larrieu as he earned a qualifying time at a meet at Pierce Community College in Los Angeles, then pacing himself with Gerry Lindgren at the Olympic Trials later that year, where Mills made the US 10K team after already qualifying in the marathon.

At that point, Mills’ best official time in those six-mile races was equivalent to 28:50 in a 10K. Mills knew he’d need to be better than that to beat world record holder Ron Clarke of Australia in Tokyo. So he made it his goal to knock one second off of each lap of the track to make up the 25 seconds he thought he’d need to medal.

“I felt my chances were excellent,” Mills said. “I wrote down in my workout book, which I still have today, that I was ready to run 28:25, and on a given day, depending on how the race develops, that might be enough to win the gold medal.”

Feeling well-trained and well-rested — something that wasn’t true for any of his previous races, as he “naively” continued to train for the marathon, as he put it — Mills made one final adjustment before the race on Oct. 14, 1964, eating half of a Hershey’s bar about 10 minutes before the race, a nod to a similar tradition of eating honey before a race in high school to keep his energy level up.

## THE ROAD TO RIO 2016

**'Night Games': Many Rio events end after midnight**

**IOC's Bach: Rio will be 'safe games'**

**Meet the 2016 Rio Olympic mascots**

**Scalpers beware: Rio to crack down on resold tickets**

**Rio creates 'super bacteria' task force for sailing waters**

**New soccer venues may be added over pitch worries**

**Rio wins legal battle over Olympic golf course**

**IOC inspectors: 'Lot of progress' but schedule 'tight'**

**Volleyball to be hot ticket in 2016**

**Mayor: Rio can't relax despite World Cup success**

“Did it help me?” Mills said. “I don’t know for sure, but I do know that I was going low on the last lap, low blood sugar, and maybe if I didn’t have half a Hershey bar, I might have gone low with two laps to go, and it would have been a totally different story.”

It wasn’t, though, and instead, that last lap — after Mills, Clarke and Tunisian runner Mohamad Gammoudi had separated themselves from the field — turned out to be one of the most dramatic, thrilling and inspiring moments of that or any Games.

“Coming around the last lap we were ready to lap (Kenyan runner Naftali) Temu, and I remember Clarke being boxed in by (Tony) Cook, from Australia,” Mills said. “So I thought, ‘Whoa, this is an opportune time,’ and I moved onto his shoulder to box him in. Clarke sped up and then I sped up ... and I just stayed there, not letting him intimidate me.”

On the final lap, as Clarke and Mills ran side-by-side, the two made contact, with Clarke pushing Mills off of his line, a move Mills took personally. The brush also opened up enough room for Gammoudi to force his way between Clarke and Mills as Mills regained his balance, putting him in the lead with a couple hundred meters to go.

“(Gammoudi) told me later that he knew he either had to slow down or push through. and he thought there was still time to squeeze

through,” Mills said. “So he’s moving, I’m moving, I accidentally cut him off (trying to recover from the Clarke bump), and then he pushes Clarke and pushes me. Gammoudi’s push didn’t bother me, though, and once Gammoudi took off, I had to make the quick decision, ‘Do I go with him?’”

The answer, Mills determined, was no; he’d rather conserve his energy for a few dozen more yards and make one last kick with about 120 yards left in the race. When he got to the 100-yard mark — about even with his wife, Pat, seated 32 rows up in the stands — Mills was still several yards behind Clarke and Gammoudi, though, and his chances at gold seemed slim.

That’s when his late father — the man whose words of hope saved Mills’ life — sent him one more message that, Mills believes, pushed him to one of the most improbable gold medals in Olympic history.

“I was in lane four, Clarke was in lane three, Gammoudi lane two and lapped runners, stragglers, were in lane one,” Mills said. “So I ran the final curve wide and with 90 meters to go, one German runner came floating from lane one, behind Clarke and Gammoudi, cut into lane four, in front of me, and then over to lane five.

“And as I went by him — I’m still not quite able to catch them — I glanced at the runner out of the corner of my eye, and I thought I saw an eagle on his shoulder.

“It brought me back to my dad when I was a little boy, and him telling me after my mom died that I was broken, but someday I would have the wings of an eagle. It was just so powerful in my mind, an incredible inspiration, almost spiritual, and with 40 or 45 yards, my mind was that, ‘I may never be this close again; I’ve got to do it now.’ And then I broke the tape.”

**“AND AS I WENT BY HIM — I’M STILL NOT QUITE ABLE TO CATCH THEM — I GLANCED AT THE RUNNER OUT OF THE CORNER OF MY EYE, AND I THOUGHT I SAW AN EAGLE ON HIS SHOULDER.”**

*Billy Mills*

There was no eagle on the runner's shoulder, of course, but the vision spoke to Mills in a way that changed the outcome of the race and the course of history.

"Clarke later told me that, 'Every so often, someone will run like they have wings on their feet,'" Mills said. "And I felt like I had wings on my feet that day. ... I felt like that moment was a gift to me."

From then on, Mills, who now lives in Sacramento, California, made it his goal to pass that gift on to others as a speaker and a champion for progress in Native American communities. In addition to being inducted into the National Track and Field and U.S. Olympic halls of fame, Mills also was the subject of the 1983 movie "Running Brave" and is the spokesperson for Running Strong for American Indian Youth.

Mills was also honored with warrior status from the Lakota tribe he lived in growing up — a true sign that he was accepted, Mills said — and committed himself to giving back to the people who supported him and anyone else who could learn from his message.

"I wanted to try to live by Native American virtues and values as much as I could, so I decided I wanted to have a 'giveaway' — I'd give back to those people who helped me, and my giveaway would be perpetual," Mills said. "So I started lecturing and I wanted to help empower people and make a difference in some people's minds. ... I've been able to give, and that's been such a sacred feeling for me."

In 2012, Mills' work with Running Strong earned him the Presidential Citizens Medal, the second-highest civilian award that the U.S. gives out each year. Earlier this year, he also received the Theodore Roosevelt Award, the NCAA's highest honor, given to someone "for whom competitive athletics in college and attention to physical well-being thereafter have been important factors in a distinguished career of national significance and achievement."

*Photo courtesy of Billy Mills*

The memories remain as good as gold.

"I lived back among sacredness, I lived among despair, I lived among love, and I've lived among hate, confusion," Mills said. "I looked for the strength, and eventually it was almost like an epiphany when I realized I've got to take the culture, the traditions, the spirituality, the virtues and the values that empower the culture, and I've got to transfer them into current-day educational pursuits, or an Olympic pursuit or maybe an entrepreneurial pursuit.

"Why? Because it's those virtues and values that give us direction, give us confidence and give us the courage to focus and stay the course."

And though he still takes great pride in the gold medal he earned a half-century ago halfway around the world, Mills says the doors that medal opened in the decades since hold a far more special place in his heart.

"I've been able to touch the lives of multitudes and multitudes of people," Mills said. "But (fame) was never the goal. All I wanted to do was heal a broken soul."

You can **follow Sam Gardner on Twitter** or e-mail him at [samgardnerfox@gmail.com](mailto:samgardnerfox@gmail.com)

MORE [kansas](#) [olympics](#) [usc](#)



**BEST OF THE WEB**

Powered By **YARDBARKER**

THE week's best by NCAA®

2015 NBA mock draft

Potential first-time MLB All

College football rules that

**Web2PDF**

[converted by Web2PDFConvert.com](http://converted.by/Web2PDFConvert.com)

0 COMMENTS

[FOXSports.com](#) > [Contact Us](#) | [Press](#) | [Jobs](#) | [RSS](#) | [Sitemap](#)

**Other FOX Sites** > [FOX Sports 1](#) | [FOX](#) | [FOX News](#) | [21st Century Fox](#) | [FOX Sports Supports](#)

**Partners** > [Shop](#) | [Tickets](#)

Statistical Information provided by: [STATS LLC](#)

©2015 Fox Sports Interactive Media, LLC. All rights reserved.

Use of this website (including any and all parts and components) constitutes your acceptance of these [Terms of Use](#) and [Privacy Policy](#).

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Advertising Choices](#) | [Terms of Use](#) | [\[+\]](#) [Site Feedback](#) | [Opinion Panel](#) | [EULA](#)