

## Pass It On®...

### Going the Distance.

*Why top collegiate and professional athlete Dillon Shije will never stop running for his people.*

Dillon Shije is soft-spoken and respectful in his conversations. He brushes off compliments on his college success with shy gratitude and moves deftly to give credit to tribal elders.

Dillon grew up on the Zia Pueblo Indian Reservation in New Mexico. He was the top Native American runner in the U.S. during his final two years of high school. He ran his way to Division 1 National Champion as a University of Colorado - Boulder student, his running life was featured in an article in the New York Times, and he was the subject of a documentary that highlights his senior year training on the dusty reservation roads.

Dillon runs like the classic long-distance athlete: lithe, rhythmic, flowing effortlessly across the terrain. His Native American upbringing teaches him to be at peace with himself, yet inside he feels the pull of competition.

“I don’t run to beat someone else,” he says. “I run to compete with myself, to see how fast I can become.”

When he was a young boy, the Tribal Elders told Dillon that he must become a leader — that he must focus on his studies, leave the reservation and go to college, grow and come back to teach others. It is the hero’s story: The boy leaves to take on the challenges of a wider world and returns with greater knowledge that blesses his people. And so it was with Dillon. He earned degrees in integrative physiology and history and returned to New Mexico to coach young people and work with Native American communities in the West, teaching both about respecting traditions, understanding ancestral challenges and working to build self-dignity.

Running is central to Dillon’s cultural and religious teachings. It is a spiritual experience that connects his present and future to the past.

“When we understand the traditions of our ancestors, we begin to better understand ourselves,” he shares. There is a focus on being at

peace but also uneasy with one’s performance. The push to be more is ever-present. “I teach each of these kids that they are all to be leaders.”

His pride in his heritage is evident. He has put in the miles, one stride at a time, contemplating the future of his people. He brings back to them a gift of experience, and he makes it clear that each generation can go further than the last.

Dillon’s spiritual and physical practices have existed since the beginning of humanity. He runs into the future with a call to return to the traditional ways of respecting yourself, learning from collective history and living for others. As the sun rises in the early morning desert, you’ll see Dillon striding on a distant horizon, his breathing the act of an eternal connection, while a trail of young runners follows him into the future.

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By The Foundation for a Better Life®

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