

Pass It On®...

Billy Mills

The story behind America's first and only 10,000-meter Olympic champion.

Billy Mills was born on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation for the Oglala Lakota people. His mother died when he was 9 years old.

Hurting from the loss, young Billy took up sports, believing an article given to him by a Jesuit priest that stated that Olympians are chosen by the gods.

"I wanted to be chosen by the gods," remembers Billy. And it had nothing to do with the Olympics. "I thought if I was chosen by the gods ... perhaps I would be able to see my mother again."

At first, he tried boxing, but after six losses and zero wins, he decided it wasn't for him. Neither was basketball, or football. So Billy started running. "It felt spiritual," Billy says. The life of a long-distance runner can be a lonely path you cannot share. That's where Billy discovered his oneness with the earth. His Lakota name means "Respects the Earth."

Billy ran his first race in jeans and basketball shoes. He finished dead last but fell in love with the sport. Then his father passed away, and with a broken heart, he stopped running. Being orphaned at 12 and feeling alone, Billy didn't run again until he reached high school. That's when a coach encouraged his students.

"One of you can do something magical in sport. One of you can become a great athlete," the coach said.

"I felt it was my dad speaking to me," Billy remembers. He came out of high school with the fourth-fastest mile in the nation. He went on to the University of Kansas and trained hard, hoping to make the Olympic team. He finished second in the trials and was on his way.

At the start of the 10,000-meter race in that 1964 Tokyo Olympic Games, Billy Mills, an orphaned boy from unknown Pine Ridge, South Dakota, lined up to run for his country, his parents, his people. As the race wore on, runners fell behind, lap after lap, until four led the pack. With one lap to go, he was

nudged out of his lane from behind, then bumped off his stride again. He was struggling at a distant fourth place.

As he lapped one of the slower runners, he recalls, "I look, and out of the corner of my eye, on his jersey, I saw an eagle. It was my dad. 'You have the wings of an eagle.'"

In the last 100 meters, an unheard-of Billy Mills broke into a dead sprint from lane four and strode his way into the history books with an Olympic record. He later found the runner he had passed and looked closely at his jersey. There was no eagle.

"It was simply a perception," Billy remembers. "Perceptions create us or destroy us, but we have that opportunity to create our own journey."

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