



## Lesson 5

# Billy Mills:

Prepare Yourself for the Road,  
not the Road for Yourself



# I. Billy Mills: Prepare Yourself for the Road, not the Road for Yourself

## II. Brief Description of the South Dakota Feature

Billy Mills (Tamakhoche Theh ila) is a native South Dakotan, born in Pine Ridge, in 1938. He is Oglala Lakota and grew up on the reservation. As part of his warrior spirit, he enjoyed boxing and was successful at it. He was even more successful at the running he did as part of his training as a boxer, though, and worked at track and field, which brought him high school state championships in Kansas, a scholarship to the University of Kansas, and national championships there. Mills was perhaps the greatest upset staged by any American in the modern Olympic games when he outran three favorites even though he was not a contender in any way, shape, or form that October day in 1964. Mills spent his life preparing himself, improving himself, rather than asking others to make the pathway to success easier for him. He prepared himself for any road he would need to run and was successful as a result.

## III. Lesson Plan Steps:

### A. Anticipatory Set

“How many of you watched the Olympics? How did America do? What were some of your favorite events?” Give students time to talk about the Olympics a bit to get some of the highlights.

“One of the most exciting things about Olympic competitions—about any athletic competition really—happens when you have a huge upset, and some underdog steps in and grabs the gold medal instead of the person who was expected to win. Well, today’s story is about a person who did just that. A person from South Dakota. A person who created perhaps the largest upset in the history of America’s Olympic competitors.”

Start the reading.

### B. Objective and Purpose

Objective: Students will be able to outline the major events in the life of Tamakhoche Theh ila/Billy Mills.

Students will be able to provide evidence from Mills’ life, which provides support for how he prepared himself for the road.

Students will be able to correctly identify hypothetical examples from their own lives, which differentiate between preparing yourself for the road and preparing the road for yourself.

Purpose: The purpose of this lesson plan is to learn about the life of Billy Mills, an important South Dakotan, and reflect the importance of preparing yourself for the road.

### C. Resources to be Accessed

1. "Billy Mills: Prepare Yourself for the Road, not the Road for Yourself" (see below)
2. "Wokini": An autobiography by Billy Mills

### D. Modeling

Once the class has finished reading the resource, either individually or aloud as a class, the teacher offers:

"Based on that, let's talk through an example. Let's say it is my job to keep my lawn mowed at home. And let's also say, I don't like mowing the lawn. It's hot out and the sun is beating down on you. Grass is flying everywhere, and I have to pick up sticks ahead of time. What are some things I can do that prepare me for the road, the kinds of things that make me better at mowing, that make the job less of a chore because I've prepared myself?

1. Well, I can make sure I'm in good shape. Then pushing the lawn mower isn't so hard.
2. I can make sure I'm getting enough sleep. Being well-rested makes work easier to do.
3. I can make sure that when I am ready to mow, I've picked up all the sticks, so I don't have to stop and start each time I come up to one. Same thing for the toys in the yard that my little brother and sister are always leaving lying around.
4. Finally, I can make sure the mower is ready to use. The blades are sharp, the oil changed, the gas can has enough gas for me to fill the tank.

All of these things are making myself better, things I can do to make mowing less of a nuisance.

What, then, are things that don't make me better, that prepare not me, but the road.

1. I can let the grass grow really long, so that I can skip mowing it this week.
2. I can try to convince my little brother or sister that it really should be their job.
3. I can turn the sprinklers/irrigation system off, so the grass turns brown and stops growing.
4. I can just tell my Dad I'm not mowing it anymore, that if he wants it done, he can either do it himself or pay somebody else to do it.

Do you see the difference? In each case, I'm not getting better at anything. I'm just demanding the lawn (the road) be changed, so I can slack off. Change the lawn, so the grass can just be really tall. Change the job, so my little brother has to do it, so it's somebody else's job. Change the lawn, so it is no longer a lush green but an ugly stretch of nothing but dry and brown. Or just declare that I don't care about the lawn. It can just grow or somebody else can do it. In the end, that means I get less exercise, contribute less to my home and family, and live in a house with an ugly yard. In each case, the lawn gets worse, and I get worse. I haven't prepared myself for anything."

### E. Checking for Understanding/Guided Practice

Teacher offers the following for guided practice:

"OK, now it's your turn. I'm going to give you an example of a student who is getting ready for a big history test. For each thing he does, tell me whether this is him preparing himself for the road or him preparing the road for himself:

Item 1: He asks the teacher if the test can be open book. (Preparing the road.)

Item 2: He begins re-reading the textbook materials that are the subject matter for the test. (Preparing

himself for the road.)

Item 3: With the final few minutes of science or social studies class, when the lesson is over and students have free time, he takes out his notes from class and re-reads them. (Preparing himself for the road.)

Item 4: He decides not to study at all, planning to ask for extra credit if he does poorly on the test. (Preparing the road.)

Item 5: He skips a movie he wanted to watch on Netflix with his family, retiring to his bedroom to study the night before the test. (Preparing himself for the road.)

See the difference? If I take steps to ensure I do well on the test, I am preparing myself for the test, i.e., the road. If I am asking someone else to change something so that I can escape the consequences or difficulties of the test, even if it means I learn less, that is me preparing the road for me, making somebody else take responsibility for me getting a passing grade. When I do this, I never become a better student, I never really learn to study. And, eventually, it all catches up with me because some day I'll have to take a road—a test, a lawn, a job—that nobody prepares for me. That's when I fall on my face."

### F. Independent Practice

"Time for a thought experiment. Think of a job you need to do or a skill you'd like to master or some way you can make some money or how to make it on an athletic team or how to get into the college you want.

Got one? Good! Now I want you to think of three ways you can prepare yourself for that road—things that you can do to make yourself stronger, more resilient, more capable that will help you accomplish that. Go!"

(Wait 45 seconds or however long it takes before attention spans begin to wane.)

"Great. Now let's do the other end. Think of three ways you can make somebody else or something else prepare the road for you. What work can you make someone else do in order to make the job easier for you, the college easier to get into regardless of your own efforts, the money faster and easier to get. Ok, I'll wait while each of you come up with those three."

(Wait time.)

### G. Student-Led Closure

"Ok, time for the pay-off. Turn to your partner and each of you share three items that prepare yourself, then three that prepare the road. But not just that, tell why the thing you do qualifies as prep for you or for the road. Partner, you think about what they've said and evaluate it. Are they right or do they have it mixed up? If you can't decide, I'll be circulating, so check in with me and we can get it sorted out."

Lesson ends.

## H. Standards Addressed

SD Mindsets & Behaviors for Student Success: K-12 College, Career, and Life- Ready Competencies for Every Student:

- B.LS.4. Self-motivation and self-direction for learning.
- B.LS.10. Participation in enrichment and extracurricular activities.
- B.SMS.6. Ability to identify and overcome barriers.
- B.SMS.7. Effective coping skills.

English/Language Arts:

- 4. RI. 2 & 5.RI.2. Determine two or more main ideas of a text and explain how they are supported by key details; summarize the text.
- 4.RI.8 & 5.RI. Explain how an author uses reason and evidence to support particular points in a text.
- 6.RI.1. Cite relevant textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as logical inferences drawn from the text.
- 6.RI.2. Determine a central idea of a text and how it is conveyed through particular details. Provide a summary of the text distinct from personal opinions or judgments.
- 6.RI.3. Analyze in detail how a key individual, event, or idea is introduced, illustrated, and elaborated in a text.

Social Studies:

- 8.SS.2.K: The student tells of the effects of boarding schools on Native Americans, including the U.S. government's enactment of compulsory attendance of Native American children and its enforcement on reservations in South Dakota.
- 8.SS.8. B. The student tells the histories and present-day existence of Native Americans in South Dakota: Oceti Sakowin Oyate (including select standards from Oceti Sakowin Essential Understandings 1-7), Mandan, Sahnish (Arikara), Cheyenne, Crow, and Hidatsa, among others.

Oceti Sakowin Essential Understandings and Standards:

- Standard 7.2 Examine and describe actions taken by Oceti Sakowin individuals and communities that bring about social change.
- Standard 7.3 Students will identify ways that the Oceti Sakowin values provide resilience in keeping the Oceti Sakowin way of life.

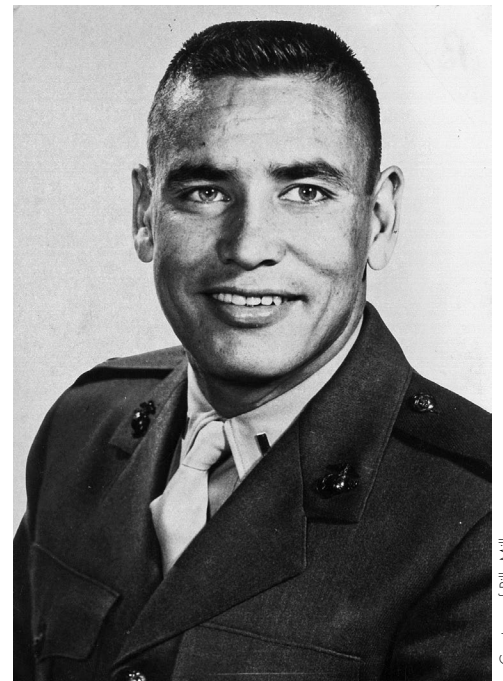
# Billy Mills:

## Prepare Yourself for the Road, not the Road for Yourself

Have you ever seen a really old-fashioned football helmet? They were little more than thin straps of leather that wrapped around your head. Today's helmets look like something NASA might have built for space travel. Their surfaces are solid and unbreakable. Inside, padding gives the player maximum cushion and protection. A face guard allows athletes to see but still protects them from being struck in the face. All of these are good things, of course. Football can be a dangerous sport, and a really good helmet can help the athlete escape injury.

But safety equipment isn't the most important part of protecting a football player. The best thing a player can do to avoid injury is to be in great shape, to be able to run fast and dodge tackles, to learn when it is best to take a hit but also when it is best not to. A safe athlete is the one who is prepared to play the game.

Billy Mills was a great athlete, one of the last century's towering figures, a man who took the sporting world by storm. Billy Mills is also a South Dakotan. His full name is William Mervin Mills; his Oglala Lakota name is Tamakhoche Theh ila, which means "loves the earth" or "respects his country." He was born in 1938 in Pine Ridge. When he was just 7 years old, his mother died. His father worked long hours as an electrician to support Billy and his seven brothers and sisters. Back in those days, carnivals would travel to all of the small towns in South Dakota. One of the carnival workers, a strong man, would challenge all comers to feats of strength, offering a \$5 reward to any who could best him. Not everyone could. But Billy's father took the challenge and beat the strong man every time.



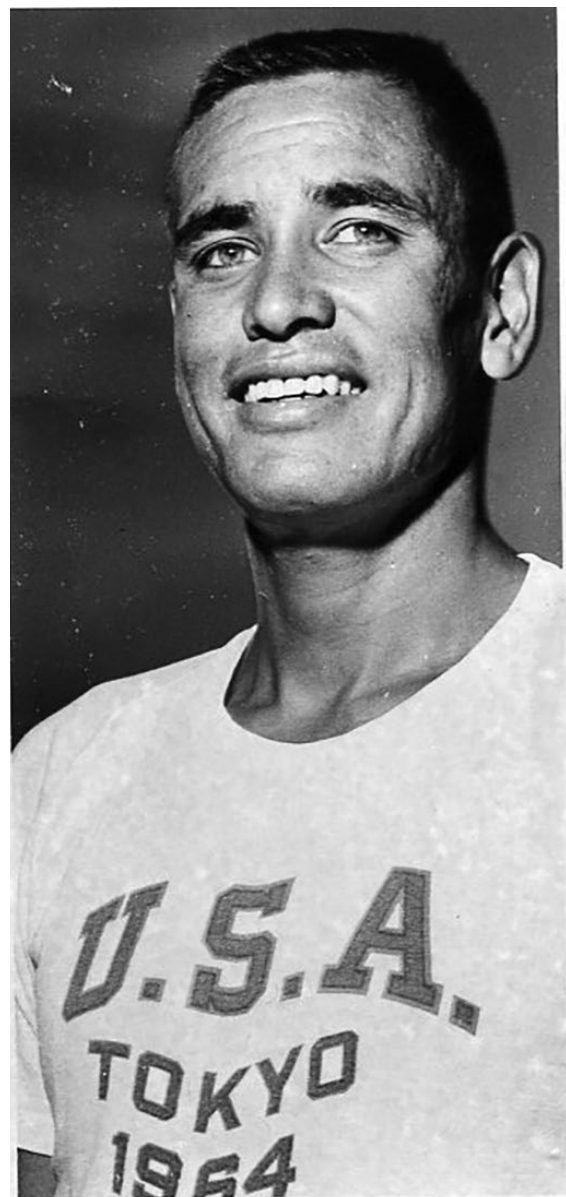
Courtesy of Billy Mills

When his father died in 1951, Billy was only 12 years old. His two older sisters, ages 16 and 18, took over the household. Later, he attended high school at Haskell Indian School in Lawrence, Kansas. He tried all sports his freshman year, but could not make any of the teams. The coach told Billy that, starting his sophomore year, there would be a new sport called cross country and encouraged him to try out for the team. He ran long distances over the summer in basketball shoes. Starting his sophomore year, he won his third cross country race and was undefeated the rest of his high school career. He never owned his own track shoes until the night before the 10,000 meter final at the Tokyo Olympics.

Billy's high school success opened up a golden opportunity for this orphaned boy from rural South Dakota. The University of Kansas offered him an athletic scholarship. And so, he studied and kept on running. The National Collegiate Athletic Association recognized him three times as an All-America cross-country athlete. He and his teammates earned a national outdoor track championship in 1959 and 1960.

When he graduated, Billy joined the United States Marine Corps Officer Candidate School and was commissioned a second lieutenant on Dec. 23, 1962. Interested in making the military a career, he focused on becoming the best marine possible and was considering going to flight school, or so he thought.

The Marine Corps chose Billy for the elite Marine Corp track and field team training to make the U.S. Olympic team. In 1964, he made the Olympic team in two events: marathon and the 10,000 meter run.



Courtesy of Billy Mills

The Olympics that year were held in Tokyo, Japan. In the 10,000 meter run (6.2 miles), Billy was an “also ran,” someone who was fast enough to make the U.S. Olympic team, but not fast enough to become a contender. Three men were the odds-on favorites: Ron Clarke of Australia who held the world record, Pyotr Bolotnikof of the Soviet Union, and Murray Halberg of New Zealand who was a track gold medal winner in 1960. The other runners could be safely ignored.

Clarke’s plan for victory was to gain and hold an early, decisive lead, leaving the field of runners in the dust. It largely worked. He even lapped some of the other runners. In fact, only two runners were anywhere near the front runner—Mohammed Gammoudi of Tunisia, and surprisingly, Billy Mills—as the race drew near the tape. As Gammoudi and Clarke struggled for the lead, with Mills far enough back that he was now being ignored as a contender, Mills moved out to lane 4 and sprinted ahead. Now it was his turn to leave them in the dust. As the television commentators tried to figure out what was happening with this athlete they had already dismissed as out of contention, Mills surged ahead of both men and broke the tape. All one commentator could manage was to scream at the television viewers, “Look at Mills! Look at Mills!”

Billy Mills had won the gold medal.



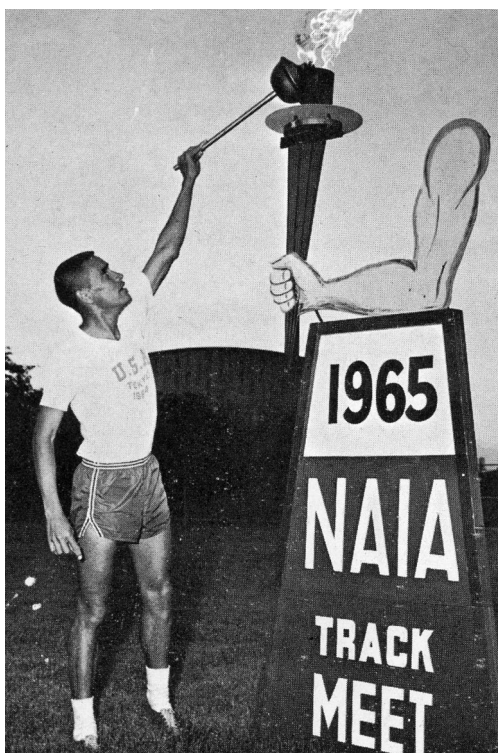
Official Marine Corps Photo#A411758



Today, Billy Mills remains the only athlete from the United States or the western hemisphere to ever win the Olympic 10,000 meter race. No American, since Mills, has ever done it again. His victory is considered by many to be the biggest upset of the modern Olympic games. (A point of interest is the Olympic games in Paris 2024 was the 2800th since the ancient Olympic games began.)

How did he do it? When Billy, who is 1/2 Lakota and 1/2 European ancestor, was a child, his father told him to take his Lakota culture, traditions, and spirituality, extract their virtues and values, then place them into his daily life for direction, confidence, and the wisdom to make the right choices and stay the course. He also told Billy to compare the Lakota virtues with those of other societies. "You will find common ground of understanding, son. The similarities will help the various societies of the world understand the Lakota prayer, We are all related." The seven Lakota virtues and values his father had him incorporate into his daily life are: generosity, courage/bravery, patience/perseverance, respect, humility, compassion, and wisdom. Incorporating these virtues into his daily life became Billy's moral compass when roads became misleading.

He did it by not focusing on his equipment or the track he had (or didn't have) to run on or the lack of family support (which couldn't be helped in any case), but instead focusing on himself, on what he could do to become a better athlete, competitor, warrior.



Courtesy of Billy Mills

This is a different approach than many people took in Billy's day and than most people take today. If people want to play baseball, they get the best gloves and bat, brand new cleated shoes, a batting helmet with the latest, space-age materials, a new uniform, new batting gloves, the works! Doing all that is preparing the road for you. It is as if Billy wouldn't run unless he could run on the best road, the best track, in the best shoes. But Billy did run and without any of those things. Instead of focusing on all those things, Billy focused on what he could do to prepare himself for whatever road was out there.

There is a lesson in this story for all of us. When some people—and it seems like it is more and more people all the time—seek

success in life, they want everyone else to make the way smooth for them. A few years ago, some high school students who wanted to get into college, a prestigious college, had their parents bribe university officials to admit them. They wanted the road prepared for them. When they were caught, the road got very bumpy very quickly. They would have been better off preparing themselves for the road—taking tough courses in high school, earning top grades, participating in meaningful extracurricular activities, contributing to the needs of their community, writing a great college-entrance essay, and studying for the college-entrance exam.

If you want to be successful, if you want to achieve your goals, you are far better off preparing yourself for the road ahead than trying to make others prepare the road for you. And even if you don't achieve what you were after, you will be a much better prepared person for whatever life throws at you, than if you sat back and asked others to "fix" the road.

This lesson applies to any aspect of life. Whether it is finding a part-time job, making an athletic team, being successful in your classes, or making friends, the best thing you can do is to take steps to improve yourself in such a way that you'll be more likely to succeed at it and at anything else. The easy way is to ask the world to change to suit your needs. (And it is easy but it's usually also unsuccessful; the world doesn't work that way.) The better way is to change yourself, work harder, learn more, get better.

When you prepare yourself for the road, you'll be more successful. Just ask Billy Mills.

## Want to learn more?

There are several good biographies of Tamakhoche Theh ila/ Billy Mills. Check one out at your library. Mills wrote his autobiography, "Wokina," which not only tells his own life story but also offers life lessons emanating from Lakota culture. There is also a movie based on his life, entitled "Running Brave" released in 1983 and still widely available today.

