

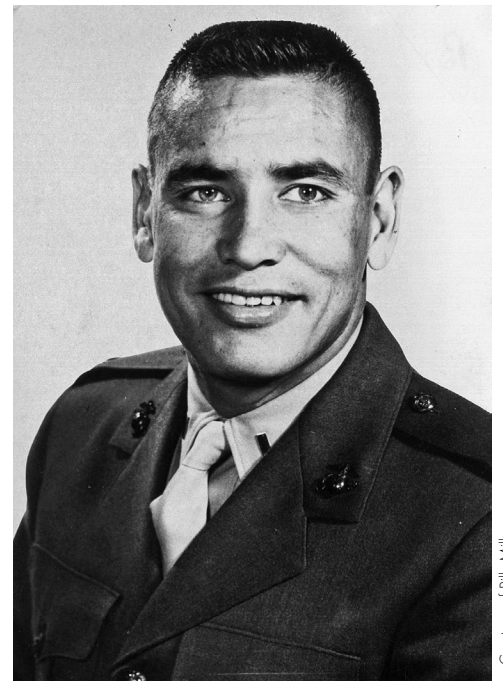
Billy Mills:

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.



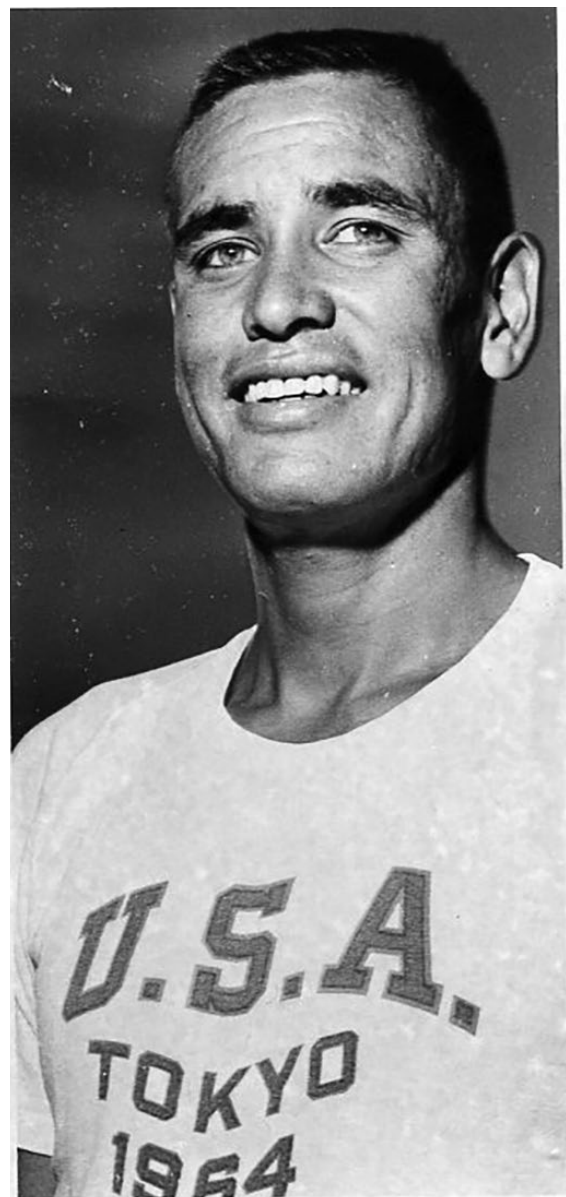
Courtesy of Billy Mills

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.

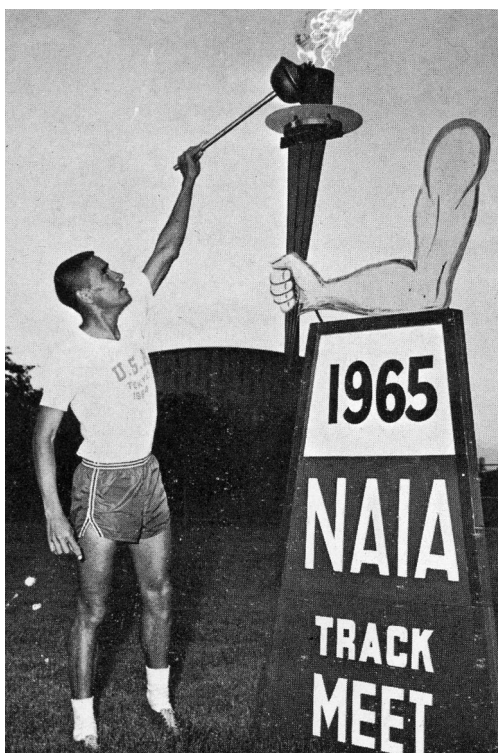


Official Marine Corps Photo#A411758

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.

