

Billy Mills

Believe-Believe-Believe



*Photo Courtesy of
Kansas Athletics*

Billy Mills, a Native American (Oglala Lakota), was raised on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota. He was orphaned at the age of 12. Billy took up running while attending the Haskell Institute in Lawrence, Kansas. He attended the University of Kansas and earned All-America cross country honors three times and in 1960 he won the individual title in the Big Eight cross country championship. Billy helped lead the University of Kansas track team to the 1959 and 1960 Outdoor National Championships.

Billy went on to become a lieutenant in the United States Marine Corps. After giving up running for a while, he returned to the sport to qualify for the 1964 Summer Olympics in Tokyo in the 10,000-meter run and the marathon. On October 14, 1964, 38 runners competed in the 10,000-meter final at the Tokyo Olympics. Billy had a 10,000-meter best of 29:10.4, and was a virtually unknown and not expected to be a medal contender. However, Billy, who had faced discrimination and difficult times his entire life, believed in himself. As he trained for the Olympic Games he visualized himself running the race over and over. In his mind, he saw himself running with the leaders and winning. He repeated over and over to himself the affirmation, “believe-believe-believe.”

The favorite, world-record holder Ron Clarke of Australia, led most of the race with a quick pace. With one lap remaining, Clarke had dropped all his main rivals, but he still had two athletes with him. Billy Mills and Mohamed Gammoudi of Tunisia were both relatively unknown and both running much faster than they ever had before. The three were hindered by lapped runners on the last lap who made no effort to let them through on the inside. In the back straight, Clarke bumped Billy, pushing him to the outside lanes and causing him to drop back about four meters. At this point, Billy focused on his affirmations, “believe-believe-believe,” as Gammoudi and Clarke sprinted for the finish. Gammoudi had shaken off Clarke and seemed to have the race won with 50 meters to go before Billy came storming past both of them to win the gold medal. Billy's winning time of 28:24.4 was a personal record by 50 seconds and a new Olympic record. The race has been called the greatest upset in Olympic history and his victory remains the only Olympic 10,000-meter win in U.S. Olympic history.

Questions for Thought:

1. Why was Billy Mills' race so surprising?
2. How did Billy prepare himself mentally to run in the Olympic Games?
3. How can you apply the story of Billy Mills to help you as an athlete and a person?