

Mills ran on "inner power"

The way Billy Mills, now 44, tells it, he wasn't the fastest runner in the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, nor was he the best. He called on something inside himself to win that 10,000 meter race — the first and only American to ever win a Gold Medal for that particular event.

"I was running that race on some inner power, some inner drive," says Mills, now a successful insurance executive in Sacramento. "And it's frightening how Robby Benson captured me on film. A close friend of mine broke into tears when he saw it. He said he felt like he was watching the whole 1964 race over again."

Mills was born and raised on the Pine Ridge Indian reservation in South Dakota and was educated at a Bureau of Indian Affairs school there. His mother died when he was 7, his father when he was 12.

"I first learned to run in order to get in shape for other sports," the affable Olympic champion says today, "but then I began running just for the joy of running itself. It

took me to another place."

In 1959, Mills received an athletic scholarship to the University of Kansas and this gave him an opportunity to leave the reservation and pursue the thing he loved most: running. He did well on the track team at Kansas, under the guidance of a man named Coach Easton (played by Pat Hingle in the movie), but he constantly battled with feelings of alienation and low self-esteem.

"At that age, I was still finding out who I was, and being an Indian in a white world made the struggle a bit harder," he remembers today. "At college, I performed far below my potential and I think a lot of that had to do with my own feelings of self-worth. In Tokyo, I finally found myself. Winning that race in 1964 definitely helped me understand myself better. I began to question why it was me who won."

"You know, it's amazing, but when I crossed the finish line in Tokyo, the first thing that came to my mind was that

my father, who had died when I was just 12, finally knew that I was an athlete," Mills recalls again, almost 20 years after his Olympic victory. "He had always wanted me to be an athlete. And now I was one."

Today Mills sponsors a national youth organization called the Billy Mills Indian Youth Leadership Program, which brings Indian youth leaders from around the country together for annual conferences on motivation, self-esteem and physical education. From 1971-1974 Mills was also an administrator in the BIA, specializing in physical education programs.

"It took 10 years for this movie to get made," Mills says, "but it was worth it. I am proud of what 'Running Brave' says about me. It captures the emotions and the fears that I had in those days and I think people will relate to it."

"And for me, the film is not about Indian people or sports so much as it is about being a human being," he adds.

—Dan Bloom