

ON THE TRAIL OF THE BONDI KILLERS *plus* THE JOYS OF QUARANTINE

Good Weekend

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MOVES



Aussie NBA star Patty Mills is on a hot streak – and he's using it to help fight racial injustice

BY *Konrad Marshall*

"When you look at Patrick, I can only say that he glides," says his great-uncle Alo Taplin, a Torres Strait Islander elder.



NBA star Patty Mills led Australia's Boomers to their historic "rose gold" medal in Tokyo and has just signed a \$17 million deal. But Eddie Mabo's unshowy nephew, who draws strength and meaning from his Indigenous roots, is also helping bridge our racial divide.

STORY BY *Konrad Marshall*
PHOTOGRAPHY BY *Paul Harris*

THE WIND is shifting. The rains are coming. The signs are there.

As senior elder on the tiny island of Mer, in the far eastern Torres Strait, Uncle Alo Tapim is the custodian of such knowledge. He knows that when the south wind - *Ziai* - blows at this time of year, the monsoons are coming. That familiar breeze blew one recent evening, kissing his cheeks.

He was on the verandah with his great-nephew, who is in culture considered his grandson but who is to us Patrick Sammy James Mills, basketball star and national treasure. Mills, 33, wore his freshly minted "rose gold" (bronze) medal from the Tokyo Olympics, and listened intently to the old man. "We own the south wind," Tapim, 76, reminded him. "We belong to the south wind. The south wind is ours."

In this moment of natural flux, Tapim also yarned with Mills about the games he played in Japan, from his team's undefeated run through the group stage, to their triumph over Slovenia during which Mills poured in 42 points: a record in the Olympic medal round. The tally ensured his beloved Boomers stood on the dais for the first time.

Where basketball purists saw modern mechanics - copybook passing to the low post, faultless pull-up jumpers in transition - Tapim saw something ancient, beyond the ball skills taught to Mills by his Torres Strait Islander father Benny, or the temperament nurtured in him by his Aboriginal mother Yvonne. Tapim saw totems.

He saw Dabor, the Spanish mackerel, which represents speed. "The way Patrick moves around court," Tapim tells *Good Weekend*, "he weaves and darts - with efficiency!" He saw Waumer, too, the frigate bird, who doesn't so much fly as float, sitting on the air, tail feathers steering. "When you look at Patrick, I can only say that he glides." Finally, Tapim says, he saw the green sea turtle, Nam, who is slow - both on land and in water - but grows strong and steady, until its big, round shell is covered in barnacles, and those barnacles are your cousins and uncles and aunts. Nam represents the understanding you carry, the family you bring.

His other family was watching, too: the Kokatha in remote South Australia, 2700 kilometres away, many near Ceduna. Not far from there is a site once used for traditional ceremonies: a desert waterhole with a big, flat rock as long as a basketball court. Stand on that rock where it rises, as Mills has done, and you can see *everything*. They call it *Kuru Ibla*: the eye of the eagle. The family totem from his Aboriginal side is the wedge-tailed eagle - who sees into the distance, who surveys all openings and obstacles, who knows how the world unfolds.

"We've always noticed that with Patrick. He has that sight," his mum, Yvonne, tells me from her home on the Sunshine Coast. Not just in games, but in life. "He knows where he needs to be. He considers everything. Patrick always has clear vision for what the outcome will be."

LET'S DANCE

there. First, he saw Spurs sprinkled throughout the Brooklyn organisation. “It’s the modern-day San Antonio, if you like.” Next, he’s offered a chance to play a larger part for an immediate title contender in an NBA championship – for his star to become a planet or comet, maybe the moon. “It’s humbling,” he says. “There’s a feeling of opportunity: to be able to be me, and fulfil a role that is true to who I am.”

He’s on a \$US12 million (\$16.6 million), two-year contract. I’m curious if the money (in 2017 he signed a \$US50million, four-year contract) has ever got the better of him. Choosing Brooklyn, he says, answers that question. Because he could have made more elsewhere, instead of chasing success? “How do I say that without saying that?” he says, laughing. “I definitely attempted it!”

He’s not one to flaunt his wealth, anyway. I ask what he drives, knowing that Durant (Chevrolet Camaro SS), Harden (Rolls-Royce Wraith) and Irving (Lamborghini Aventador) have ostentatious favourites within lavish car collections. Mills? He drives a Volkswagen Golf. Has done for 10 years.

He does own a slice of tropical paradise: a getaway waterfront acre on the north shore of Oahu, fringed by palms. It cost \$US1.92 million. “People might hear Hawaii and think indulgence, but let’s start peeling back the layers,” he says. “It gave me a connection to home, to the water, to the culture of Oceania. I get my three-pronged spear and go down into the water, get my fish, clean it, gut it, chuck it on the fire.”

Arrive at the Mills compound and you’re likely to find him up a banana tree with a machete, chopping leaves so Alyssa can wrap dough for damper. They “practise culture” together daily, through food and music and art. When the NBA schedule is hectic, Alyssa goes alone to the Torres Strait, to improve her dancing and fish for coral trout and see all the aunties.

“I personally feel like this culture is a part of who I am and who we are,” she says. The value of a big contract – to both of them – is the freedom it buys, and the change it can affect. “We want to leave a lasting impression. It’s all about impact.”

AS I enter the fourth hour of talking to Patty Mills, he sits this final time in front of a fan-mail collage on the hotel-room wall. Almost every kid’s letter sent to him includes a Crayola or Texta scribble of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islands flags, and Mills is so touched he gets tearful. He’s also emotional because he’s (almost) home for the first time in 18 months. “My life is going from journey to journey, mate,” he says. “I can’t wait to see my family. I can’t wait to feel the ocean and touch the sand and jump in the red dirt.”

I can’t help but look at him now and think back to his beginnings, all those songlines and totems, the dispossession and deaths in custody, the Stolen Generations and the Native Title Act, and all he’s done since, and how it feels as though Mills was *meant* to be. Meant to be the next icon for Indigenous Australia. But is he ready? Does he even want that? “Wait,” he replies. “Do you think I’m an icon for Indigenous Australians only?”

I don’t. There is clearly something different in his ascension, in the way he’s been received as a bridge between black and white. There’s a long list of Indigenous athletes whom we’ve fêted madly yet failed badly, from Johnny Mullagh to Adam Goodes. Each episode is like a pencil line drawn on a wall, tracking the height of an ignorant child. But hopefully more lines are edging higher, marking our growing cultural fluency. Remember that photo after the medal match: of big Joe Ingles, pale and balding, hugging little Patty Mills, dark and dreadlocked?

“That image is a moment, like Peter Norman or Cathy Freeman,” says Murran and Bunitj woman Nova Peris, the politician and former athlete. “It was like Patty was playing for something greater. For reconciliation.” Peris suspects this is partly why Mills has avoided toxic whitelash in his career so far. “No one can lay a finger on him,” she says. “It’s almost like, if you’re gonna box on with Patty, you’ve gotta box on with us, too.”

I offer that thesis to Mills – that his moment transcended sport – that the way we respond to him is a reflection of us and how we might be learning. “Well, when you’re tapping that around on the page, let me guide you,” Mills says, palms together. “I’ve always been about building this unifying thing. And maybe, for me, basketball is a way of softly bringing down all these barriers, that careful way of getting to the place we all want to be.”

We don’t need to create anything new. We just need to value that which already exists and persists. We need to pay attention. The wind is shifting. The rains are coming. The signs are there.

“I don’t know the answers. I just know how to go about life, and if that’s in the right direction, then let’s empower that. This is all our culture: something we all can celebrate and enjoy. It’s like, this is working. Write that,” Mills says, beaming. “Tap away. Go. Put ball in basket.” ■

PODCAST



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