Good/Veekend SATURDAYAGE

ALL RIGHT



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



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

HE 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 aunties. 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."

For many, the outcome on court at Saitama Super Arena in early August - in particular, the performance of the majestic Mills - was the moment of #Tokyo2020. It most assuredly was for Andrew Gaze, brought to tears on television, who saw only pure will. "It was a statement," savs Gaze. "From an individual not shying away from his responsibilities, who was ready to put the team on his back and carry that burden."

Athletes from other sports looked on in awe. Wimbledon winner and Ngarigo woman Ash Barty crashed out of the games early, but caught Mills's magical moment from the couch of an Airbnb in Florida. "It was pretty special to watch," she tells *Good Weekend*. "I think all Australians just felt...immense pride."

That was the dominant emotion, too, for Kokatha man Shaun Burgoyne - the AFL's Indigenous games record holder - who watched from Melbourne with his four kids screaming for "Uncle Patty!": "I was saying to my kids, 'He's the best player on the court right now. If he can do it, you can do it. That's where dreams form."

An athletic performance became suddenly political. Federal Greens senator and Gunnai Gunditimara and Djab Wurrung woman Lidia Thorpe experienced the game as a show of resilience and survival of the oldest continuous living culture on earth. "It shows that we're still here, despite all the injustice against us," Thorpe says. "It's hard, you know. We need this inspiration."

But it was joyful, too! The beatific way Mills spoke and danced immediately afterwards, says Boomers coach Brian Goorjian, should be preserved in the national archives. "I've never felt like I did after that game. I felt numb. It may go down as the most powerful moment in the history of Australian basketball," Goorjian says. "He's an icon. Period."

TROM HOTEL quarantine in Sydney, Mills glows on **■ I** my screen. Wearing a yellow Australian team T-shirt, he jokes that I can't be in Melbourne because it's too sunny outside my window. (Burn.) He wants to know how I am, and who I am. Is my wife coping in lockdown? Does my son shoot hoops? I'm used to tactically disarming subjects. Mills disarms me.

He tells me how his family stories are handed down in song and dance. "You start to see, this thing goes deep," he says, nodding. "I'm deeply connected to both sides of my family in ways that I'm not sure I can get across, in ways that many people will never understand."

We owe it to ourselves to try. His origin story has two sides. Both could be songs.

The first begins more than a million years ago, when a volcano erupted under the Coral Sea. Magma bubbled up and hardened, and, in an ancient archipelago, a new island was born. Its red soil was rich, so plant life teemed with fish, and for aeons this paradise sat in | hurt, and lore and longing and love - was braided silence. Waiting. Melanesians settled there

and named it Mer - more recently also as Murray Island – and they dove for pearl shells and lived happily. For a time.

In 1872, missionaries arrived, (Of course they did.) In 1879, one of the colonies annexed the island. (Of course we did.) A slow exodus began. One who eventually left was Eddie Koiki Mabo, who sued the Queensland government in the 1980s, challenging the bogus colonial concept of terra nullius – a landmark 1992 High Court

Top: Patty Mills played a key role in the Boomers' best ever Olympics result. Right: with wife Alyssa, who also played US college basketball.



case upholding his native title claim. Why am I telling you all this? Because Eddie Mabo had a nephew. A boy named Benny, Benny Mills,

The other thread begins just north of the Great Australian Bight. When Europeans discovered that forbidding landscape, they described it as "waste" and it was treated as such, plundered by miners and pulverised by atomic bomb tests. Watching with sadness were the Kokatha, who belong to the spinifex and salt lakes. In 1947, a Kokatha woman and a white man had a girl named Yvonne, but, born of mixed blood, Yvonne was taken. First to an institution, then another family.

Yvonne was only two, so she did not know she had been wronged. And yet...she felt a creeping humiliation and otherness, always. Worse, she was told a lie at six: Your mother does not want you. That lie stayed with her until 1997, when, after the Bringing them Home Report, Yvonne read the plaintive letters written by her late mum: "Please give me my children back."

An American sportswriter once mused that to imagine a US counterpart for Patty Mills, you'd need to find the son of an African-American father who marched in Selma, and a mother whose Cherokee family walked the Trail of Tears - so, of course, that stolen girl named Yvonne met that Islander boy named Benny. And they married. And they worked in Indigenous affairs, living in Canberra to further that cause. And finally in 1988, flourished bringing migratory birds, and its beaches | all their knowledge - all that history and horror and

> together in the form of an only child, a son, a scion, Patrick, born in the national capital, the cradle of Australian power.

He first experienced racism on his first day in primary school, in that hour when mums are allowed to mingle and linger while their kids settle. Yvonne noticed a boy moving across the room. "The biggest boy in class," she adds, "He went over to Pat, and he punched him in the stomach."

Neither one was prepared for that blow to the gut. "How can you prepare a little boy for something like that?" Mills asks. "It was an adjustment. Adjustments were needed all the way throughout my life. They still are today."

He's talked about this before, how he created his "shield" to block out the bad words that sent him home

from school bawling. Yvonne could not bear to see hardness form in him - in

to cuddle - so they had "the discussion", the one about handling yourself and walking away.

Within a middle-class suburban life, they immersed him in culture. Every night they tucked him in and played a cassette tape of island songs - sweet Torres Strait lullabies - and when he awoke he would watch videos of traditional dance. "He was very serious about it, intently watching the screen," says his dad, Benny, smiling. "He wouldn't want to be disturbed."

Mills understood early that dance meant more than moving his arms and legs. "I knew that this movement here" - he slaps his hands in a flurry on his chest - "was the sound of a Torres Strait pigeon flapping its wings. And I knew when I was making this action" - arms rolling in a deadly, hypnotic sway - "that it was Beizam, a shark moving through the water. Those movements and songs, they kept the language alive."

A cultural bedrock was built, although not as a bulwark against coming storms. "I've gotta make the point clear," Mills says, pausing. "This wasn't a way to shelter me from what was around me. It wasn't, 'Patty had a rough day at school, let's play him this tape as he goes to sleep."

It was about finding strength in his roots, which he also found in sport, specifically team sport. His happiness was in playing with others. He was good at rugby league, better at Aussie rules, but best at basketball. Early on in Canberra, his parents established an Indigenous basketball program - the Shadows - as a space for inspiration and identity.

That's something Mills missed the moment he graduated from the Australian Institute of Sport's elite pathway program at 18, and found himself on a plane with a scholarship to St Mary's College of California. Landing alone in San Francisco, he felt untethered. He stood in a car park on the phone to his mum one night, pleading, "What am I doing? I want to come back. Get me home now!"

He held on and, in his sophomore year when he was 20, he met a young woman, Alyssa. She played basketball there, too, and grew up nearby. Alyssa is now his wife, and talks to me from Yvonne and Benny's home in Queensland. "We started out as best friends and he's still my best friend," she says, "I feel like our relationship is the greatest love I've ever known."

He needed her support. Drafted into the NBA by the Portland Trail Blazers, Mills spent two seasons riding the bench. Then, in 2011, the league was locked out for almost six months over a pay dispute, and Mills briefly played in Melbourne and China - a period plagued by self-doubt. No Shadows. No dance group. No college. Just agents and managers, injuries and struggles. "I needed to dig deeper, but you're hanging in limbo," he recalls. "It's that brutal, lonely part of being a professional athlete, which not everyone sees."

TE RETURNED to the US in early 2012 to join the ■ San Antonio Spurs, in many ways a vaunted exemplar of consistent, collective success. Their inclusive values matched his own, and he became a beloved "locker room guy", but still, he wasn't playing to the level of future NBA Hall of Famers like Tim Duncan and Tony Parker. His position on court - point guard means seeing the floor and finding the right spaces and angles within that incalculable fluid geometry. But initially Mills couldn't be trusted to play with enough savvy, too often turning the ball over or letting it fly. He needed better fitness, too. His coach, Gregg Popovich, noticed "too much junk in the trunk". He never shared that opinion with "Fatty Patty", but Mills knew.

"Every Spur has this moment with Pop," Mills says. You've gotta find where you sit in his whole system.' He had to do something extreme, so he halved his body fat and shaved his beard and head. "That helped create this impression - for me and for everyone else - that this was a different dude. One of my mottos at that time was, 'Earn the right'."

Mills thus evolved into a player whose pace and her son so loving, so eager | canny can change the complexion of any game,

whether drawing a forest of much taller opponents (he is 183 centimetres or six feet tall, incredibly short for the NBA) before dishing to a teammate in a better position, or by attacking alone - throwing up a shot that travels on some seemingly predestined 10-metre gravitational arc, dropping like falling water into a circle only slightly larger than the ball itself.

Basically, he shoots well (the frigate bird), is among the fastest players in the league (the Spanish mackerel), and uses that speed with cerebral intent (the wedgetailed eagle) to benefit all (the green turtle). "He's never been a high-volume, high-minutes guy," says Gaze. "He plays a role, and that's why he survives. He's not out there on an ego trip making the game about himself. His ability is to make those around him better."

That, too, taps deeply into the San Antonio ethos, best encapsulated by 19th-century Danish-American social reformer Jacob Riis's The Stonecutter's Credo: When nothing seems to help, I go and look at a stonecutter hammering away at his rock perhaps a hundred times without as much as a crack showing in it. Yet at the hundred and first blow it will split in two, and I know it was not that blow that did it - but all that had gone before. The locker room is festooned with that phrase, in the language of every player - including Meriam Mer. Mills's relatives did the translation.

Popovich is famous for harnessing his players' histories in such ways, but Mills was still shocked by what happened the day before game one of the 2014 NBA Finals. The Spurs had lost in 2013, and this was their chance to atone. "It's day one. Switch on. Prepare. Activate. Miami Heat. LeBron James. Dwayne Wade," he said. "You can throw any question at me and I've got the answer in the chamber, ready to fire."

Popovich stood at the front of the tiered video room: "Does anyone know what day it is today?"

Mills said nothing. Surely he couldn't be talking about Mabo Day? Then a black-and-white photo of his great-uncle, Eddie Mabo himself, appeared on screen. "And I just remember leaning back in my chair," says Mills, "Rock in my throat,"

Popovich launched into an impassioned description of the land rights campaigner. He offered no inspirational message or tactical tangent, and made no connection to Mills, other than asking if there was anything he wanted to add. "But I didn't, because he nailed it."

It's easy to see how, in this environment, Mills found his voice. His foreign accent began prompting questions about his culture, and at first he didn't know what to say. "Now, if someone is curious and they ask, 'Where are you from, mate?' they really don't know what they're walking into," he says, rubbing his hands together, "because we're gonna dive into this thing, and it might be next week by the time we get out of here."

This seems a good moment to talk about George Floyd, murdered in Minneapolis last year, and what that stirred inside Mills. He silently summons his thoughts, grateful for the opportunity - whispering, "I love it, I love it" - as the recollections roll around.

"This is what I'll say," he declares, finally. "I was more shocked at the reaction than the act itself. I remember thinking, 'Why is this one making you people realise this stuff? Is it because of the camera? His voice?' And people are calling me and saying, 'I see now!' and there's me wondering why they haven't seen for years and years."

When Black Lives Matter protests began raging in Australia soon after, and Prime Minister Scott Morrison admonished people for "importing" social causes from abroad, or went on radio to claim "there was no slavery in Australia" – despite the well-documented practice indentured labour) - Mills needed to be heard.

"Leaders of Australia - We can do better," he wrote on Twitter. Start by educating yourselves on black deaths in custody. "It doesn't need to be 'imported' because this behaviour has already existed in our own backvard for decades."



Top: Mills with Gregg Popovich at an NBA game earlier this year. The San Antonio Spurs coach once talked about Eddie Mabo to inspire his players.

The #PattyForPM hashtag was born, but does he have any interest in politics? "I don't," he answers, flatly. "Nor do I see any of the things I do as political activism. It's just what my family have always done. It's living culture."

This reminds me of a phrase in the Torres Strait. When you speak, you're "throwing words" into the air for your ancestors. Mills nods. "If there's something I believe is right, I back myself," he says. "We're not America. We are our own country, and we have our own issues. Progress has been made, but we've got so far to go."

He walks that talk, too. When the Black Summer bushfires razed our landscape, Mills used the NBA All-Star break to map a trip with Alyssa through southern NSW, dropping supplies in Mogo and Cobargo and beyond. When he returned to Texas, he ran a Mother's Dav coffee drive (#givemamacoffee), raising more than \$US100,000 for a local battered women's and children's shelter. As the pandemic took hold, he sank time and money into creating Indigenous Basketball Australia, a non-profit pathway program run by his parents. He also established Keriba Ged, a partnership taking 14-year-old son went off to bed wearing his Mills jersey." Indigenous teens to the US to learn business and hospitality skills in an Australian cafe chain.

Finally, in the middle of 2020, when the NBA season restarted and teams entered a bubble in Orlando, Mills announced that he would tip all his earnings from those Matter Australia, Black Deaths in Custody and We Got | ancestors and the people who have walked before us," You, a campaign to end racism in Australian sport.

In the midst of the pandemic pause, while we made sourdough or learnt an instrument, Mills went full philanthropist. "I couldn't play basketball, so" – he smacks his hands together clap, clap, clap - "let's get to work. Now's the time. That's the silver lining: doing the work."

T WAS dark in the tunnel in Tokyo. As Patty Mills I waited to enter the opening ceremony with fellow Olympic flag bearer Cate Campbell, she turned to him How cool would a heaving grandstand have been? - yet what he felt was the complete opposite.

"I'm getting hairs standing up just talking about it," Mills says, "What I could feel looking into that empty stadium - which was so heavy and so deep - was a presence. And it was loud. I could feel a whole country." It was Uluru, with the Boomers before the 2016 Rio Olympics. "In the red heart, you reconnect with what it all means. You feel things. A greater presence. That's what I felt."

Of all the passions Mills fosters, few mean more to him than the Boomers. Immediately before our second quarantine chat, he was sitting down, feet up, sipping | a little through his reasons, but the key ones are all

coffee, listening to Yothu Yindi and poring over the roster of former Boomers. He was about to honour those players at an event in Brisbane, including his uncle, Danny Morseu, who played in the 1980 and 1984 Olympics, and his cousin, Nathan "Outback Shaq" Jawai, the first Indigenous Australian in the NBA.

Mills is an Olympics watcher, always has been. He was 12 when he watched Cathy Freeman win gold in Sydney. "It was the becoming of me," he says, "and understanding my identity." He first played for the Boomers – and under Goorjian – at the 2008 Olympics in Beijing. Andrew Gaze and Luc Longley had only recently retired and Mills, 19, represented the changing of the guard. "The culture needed to be rebuilt," says Goorjian. "I walked back in the door 12 years later and was absolutely gobsmacked by how far it had come."

Focused on Tokyo, Mills helped establish a training centre in Newport Beach, California - a gym with the Aboriginal flag, Torres Strait Island flag and Australian flag draped on both sides of the arena. At centre court was a music box playing Cold Chisel, Kylie Minogue and AC/DC. One night he rented a luxury bus to take the squad to a huge house in the canyons outside Los Angeles. They spent the night by the pool, with food trucks and a band. Everyone got an Akubra and a bum bag with Vegemite and Milo.

Mills drove standards, too, living his famous "gold vibes only" motto by example. His training routines down to every last dribble, fake and shot - were a choreographed dance. "I've been in basketball a long time but that organisation, I've seen nothing to this level." Goorijan remembers, "Patty's mantra was, 'No surprises'. Everything was just...intentional."

In Japan, their locker room was sacred. An Indigenous man, Albert "Junior" Viranatuleo, the team manager, made sure everything was washed and hung, slogans on walls, with razors, towels, food, flags and music. "You could see the other teams walk by and marvel," says Goorijan. "It was like that line from *Butch Cassidy* and the Sundance Kid: 'Who are those guys?'"

It led, of course, to that famous bronze medal, the first for the Boomers, and Mills was sheer luminescence. Australia rejoiced largely from couches in winter lockdown, none louder or prouder than the Indigenous community. Shelley Ware, a Yankunytjatjara and Wirangu woman and sports presenter, wept. "The whole Aboriginal community was just sobbing," she says. "My

Yet the speech Mills gave afterward is what stays with her, when he again acknowledged all bygone Boomers: from the legendary Lindsay Gaze to Michael Ah Matt, the first Indigenous player to represent this country in 1964. "That's the beauty that's often missed in refleceight games, \$US1,017,818.54, directly into Black Lives | tions on Indigenous people: the deep connection to our Ware says. "Every step forward is because of them."

> **T** T'S EASY to see why Patty Mills is beloved in San Antonio, why he was once called their "spiritual leader". Yet Mills is leaving Texas, after almost 10 years, for New York and the Brooklyn Nets. He's there right now, gearing up to play for what is colloquially and accurately known as a "super team". Welcome to the new NBA era of player empowerment, in which marquee names decide where they'll play, and with whom.

To be clear, Mills is not one of those names. If he is a star in the basketball universe, his new teammates Kevin Durant, Kyrie Irving and James Harden are unfathomable celestial bodies, supernovas as much as superstars. In many ways, Mills's job at the Nets will be to bind their galactic genius. He sees his role as it has of "blackbirding" (trafficking Pacific Islanders into the same eerie electric hum he felt on his last visit to always been: driving internal culture, locker-room levity, and using his new prime-time platform for social change.

> For a figure so invested in the Spurs identity I've got to ask, why leave? "I haven't been in the frame of mind to be able to answer this question," he says, "but I'll get there now because it's important." He stumbles

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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 \$US50 million, 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."

S I enter the fourth hour of talking to Patty Mills, \square 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." ■

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