

## *'The Better I Got in Sports, the Worse the Racism Got'*

Patty Mills, a key reserve for the San Antonio Spurs, said he developed an emotional shield from a lifetime of racial abuse, but he is using the platform of the N.B.A.'s restart to speak out against racism.



By **Marc Stein**

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LAKE BUENA VISTA, Fla. — There were a few must-pack accessories for Patty Mills of the San Antonio Spurs for his stay at Walt Disney World. Mills brought a stack of books on Black history in the United States and his native Australia. He made sure to carefully transport his favorite flat-brimmed hat, which bears two flags representing Australia's Indigenous populations.

Mills also arrived for the restart of the N.B.A. season with what he referred to as “my shield” — his internal defense mechanism to ward off hurtful words and actions. The shield, he said, is a byproduct of a lifetime of racial abuse that began on his first day of kindergarten, soon after Mills's parents had moved to the Australian capital of Canberra to take jobs with the federal government.

“I'm the only Black kid in the room,” Mills said of that first day. “It didn't take long before the biggest kid in the room walked up to me and threw a straight uppercut to the guts, completely knocking the wind out of me and leaving me in all sorts of tears.”

“I saw this boy coming from the left, and he came from a fair distance,” said his mother, Yvonne Mills, who was against a wall nearby, observing alongside

other parents. "I can still feel the punch in my stomach, too."

More than 25 years later, with a slew of similar stories to tell from throughout his life, Mills trusts his shield as much as his jump shot. That is no small thing given Mills's ability to produce instant offense off the bench, which has enabled him, as a 6-foot, 180-pound guard, to last for nine seasons as a trusty change-of-pace option for the Spurs and become one of the most feared scorers in international basketball.



"Given the unfortunate events that have happened in this country, we have the ears of people," Mills said. Matthew Adegbonya

"A lot of things that are said just bounce off me because of the shield I've created," Mills said. "I just need to work out the appropriate times to lower it, or when to take it off completely."

This moment is one of those times. Mills, 31, has joined the global push to focus on social matters as much as his basketball job in Florida will allow — even if that means revealing painful tales from the past. He has been finding his voice as an activist in recent years and pledged to join the many N.B.A. players who are determined to use the platform of the league's rebooted season to fight against racism and police brutality.

“It's the same battle on two continents,” Mills said, referring to his home nation several time zones away.

The Spurs may play as few as eight games at Disney World because they are a long shot to make the playoffs, which they have not missed since 1997. Yet Mills has ensured that his time here will resonate no matter how short. He is donating his remaining salary of about \$1 million to Black Lives Matter Australia, Black Deaths in Custody and a new campaign — We Got You — he helped launch to show support for athletes as they fight racism in Australian sport.

After participating in the first game of the N.B.A. restart on Thursday night, Utah's Donovan Mitchell mentioned Mills and Jrue Holiday of the New Orleans Pelicans as emerging leaders of the N.B.A.'s social justice movement. He lauded both for agreeing to donate the remainder of their salaries to Black causes and said players who are speaking out are “not really asking for permission.”

“Given the unfortunate events that have happened in this country, we have the ears of people,” Mills said, referring to the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, who were killed by the police. “For the first time in my career, I've had teammates, old teammates, coaches, old coaches, even old friends — the almost universal question they ask is: ‘What can I do to help?’ Just by so many people saying that, I feel like there is a tide change.”

He formed We Got You with both Black and white athletes in part because

campaigning against racism, Mills said, is much tougher for Black athletes in Australia. Adam Goodes, a former Australian Rules football star, was an anti-racism advocate who in 2015 began to be relentlessly booed by opposing fans. The backlash ultimately prompted Goodes, at 35, to retire suddenly, one year after he had won the country's Australian of the Year award for national good citizenship.



Mills said he wants to give aspiring Indigenous basketball players in Australia someone to emulate. Matthew Adekponya

Of course, as Mills has also learned, speaking out invariably leads to the sort of storytelling that requires “putting yourself in a vulnerable position because you have to relive traumatic experiences.” Shield down.

Mills's mother is Aboriginal, and his father is from the Torres Strait Islands. The two flags on the hat Patty Mills brought with him to Florida represent his two identities.

In a one-hour conversation after a recent practice, Mills shared some of the names he was called during his childhood, including “darkie,” “blackie,” “petrol sniffer,” “monkey,” “chimp,” “abo” (a derogatory term short for Aboriginal) and other disparaging terms that he was called “regularly at school or on the sporting fields.”

“The better I got in sports,” Mills said, “the worse the racism got.”

The Mills family moved to Canberra because his parents got jobs working in Aboriginal affairs for the government. “It was a bit like going to Washington,” said Benny Mills, Patty’s father.

Yet leaving their home on Thursday Island in Torres Strait — where, Patty said, everyone “looked like me and spoke like me” — landed him in that kindergarten classroom where he was first punched.

“It was the very beginning of how I was going to be treated for the rest of my time at school, not only by students but, more appallingly, by teachers and principals,” Mills said.

Within a few years, when Mills was 9, his parents began explaining the traumatic past of his mother, Yvonne Mills. One of five siblings born to a white man and an Aboriginal woman, Yvonne and the other four children were taken from their mother, Gladys Haynes, in 1949 after their parents had separated. Yvonne, the youngest, was 2 years old. The children were moved to group homes as wards of the state and sent to separate foster families in a government-sponsored social engineering program designed, in effect, to assimilate Aboriginal children into white society.

Throughout their childhoods, Yvonne and her siblings were told that their mother did not want them. The falsehoods were exposed by a government inquiry in the mid-1990s, which confirmed decades of human rights violations that made Yvonne part of what became known as Australia’s “Stolen Generations” — although she said she did not receive a written



acknowledgment of such status from the South Australian government until 2018. Yvonne had virtually no contact with her mother between the ages of 2 and 17; Haynes died in 1979.



In his youth, Mills's instinct was to "let my game do the talking." In adulthood, he is trying, like his parents did, to more forcefully influence change. Thomas Peter/Reuters

Patty Mills said he can still picture the car ride during which this was first discussed. Patty was sitting behind his mother in the left-side passenger seat of his parents' white Toyota Corolla and got out of the car when they arrived at their home, before Yvonne could even open the door.

"I remember looking down at my arms and the back of my calves as she's

getting out of the car,” Mills said. “I look up to her and I say, ‘So does this mean they will come and take me away, too?’

“I remember her answer very vividly,” he said, recalling his mother’s words: “‘Your dad is going to stand on that big rock in the driveway with a big stick. And no one is going to come anywhere near you.’ ”

Learning about his mother’s torment, Mills said, was “a turning point.” His athletic talent was already blossoming in the basketball and social club his parents founded in Canberra for Indigenous Australians called Shadows, but Mills said that was when he began to realize “why I”m being treated differently at school.”

In his youth, Mills’s instinct was to “let my game do the talking.” In adulthood, he is trying, like his parents did, to more forcefully influence change. Just staying visible, Mills said, is a big part of it — to give aspiring Indigenous basketball players in Australia someone to emulate. Mills was only the third Black Australian to represent the country in basketball at the Olympics, joining Michael Ah Matt (1964) and Mills’s uncle Danny Morseu (1980 and 1984).

“My Uncle Danny played 30 years before I did,” Mills said. “I don’t want another 30 years to go by before another Indigenous Australian plays for Australia.”

He has thrust himself into anti-racism causes across sports in Australia with the support of Spurs Coach Gregg Popovich, whose bond with Mills was cemented on the eve of the 2014 N.B.A. finals. Popovich stunned Mills when he began a crucial practice by introducing the story of Eddie Mabo to the team. Mabo, who was Mills’s great-uncle, is revered by Indigenous Australians to such a degree that his landmark campaign for their land ownership rights has long prompted calls for a national holiday in his name.



San Antonio Spurs Coach Gregg Popovich described Mills as “a great citizen of the world.” David Zalubowski/Associated Press

“It’s been very satisfying to watch Patty grow into someone who is much more interested in our world than basketball,” Popovich said. “He has grown into a great citizen of the world. And Patty’s story is pretty important and very timely, because normally all we think about is the race problem here. It’s in many places.”

Mills said he feels fortunate to play for a franchise and a coach — and in a league — that encourages him to “speak out on these things.” The Spurs, he said, urge him “to continue to show who I am as a Black Australian.”