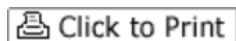




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Merritt burning to be the best

By Dick Patrick, USA TODAY

PORTSMOUTH, Va. — The tour of the city and LaShawn Merritt's roots begins in the Cavalier Manor neighborhood, at his mother's ranch home.

Brenda Stukes isn't in; she's still at work at nearby Woodrow Wilson High School. Merritt says a quick hello to his stepfather, Robert Stukes, and his sister, Antionesha, 19. There are hugs for her sons, Kwame and Antwan, named after LaShawn's late older brother.

VIDEO: [Merritt spoke with USA TODAY in 2008 about the 400](#)

BEIJING ARCHIVE: [Merritt led U.S. sweep of 400 meters](#)

BEIJING ARCHIVE: [Merritt collected second gold in relay](#)

The living and dining rooms contain framed newspaper stories of Merritt's victories in the 400 meters and 4x400 relay at last summer's Beijing Olympics.

Merritt will compete in the 400 at the USA Track & Field Championships, which start Thursday and conclude Sunday in Eugene, Ore. He turns 23 Saturday, the day of the 400 final, in a meet that is the qualifier for August's world championships.

Merritt takes a circuitous route through Cavalier Manor, a sprawling neighborhood that is predominantly African-American and was developed in the 1950s, according to the city planner's office. "My dad grew up right there," says Merritt, pointing to a nearby home. "My uncles live here. That's my granddad cutting the grass over there. I have an aunt around the corner. All the family is out there. This is why I love the neighborhood so much."

He stops in front of a smaller house, down the street from where he attended William E. Waters Middle School. It's where he and his sister lived with their mother after her divorce from Owen Merritt, who lived with Antwan, their eldest child.

"It was hard at times," Merritt says. "But we had a lot of people trying to help because she was a single parent. My dad helped a lot. A lot of people around here helped, getting me to practices, helping me with (athletic) shoes. They saw I was on a positive road. Everybody wanted to help. Another reason I love the city so much."

He slows by the Cavalier Manor Recreation Center, where he worked summer jobs in high school. "There's the gym, pool, basketball court," he says. "Had to learn to swim so I could save kids if they jumped in."

As he parks at Wilson High School, Merritt warns, "I'm going to get talked to death here."

Sure enough, he's mobbed by teachers and administrators, asking about the U.S. meet and the world championships, scheduled Aug. 17-25 in Berlin.

Training in school hallway

As a freshman and sophomore at Wilson, Merritt was an undistinguished 100 and 200 sprinter. "We were mainly football players lifting weights," he says.

As a junior, he started taking the 400 seriously.

His training was unorthodox. It wasn't at the track, which was a slab of concrete that bothered Merritt's feet and legs when he ran. He preferred running the school's wide hallways on carpeting, which has since been torn out. He practiced block starts on a major corridor, where students were stationed at intersections to prevent collisions.

He won the state 400 title in 2003, in 47.9 seconds. Afterward he met local youth coach Dwayne Miller, who still operates the Norfolk Real Deal Track Club and coaches five pros. "Coach Dwayne told me there were a lot of things I was doing wrong he could correct," Merritt says.

As a senior, he'd practice with the Wilson team and then do workouts with Miller. In 2004, Merritt won the 400 at the national scholastic meet, the U.S. junior meet and the world junior championships (45.25), where he also anchored the U.S. 4x100 and 4x400 relays to victory.

He left Virginia's Tidewater area to attend East Carolina in Greenville on a track scholarship. During his freshman year in 2005, he ran 44.93, then the second-fastest indoor 400. A month later he turned pro and returned home.

Nike, his shoe sponsor, steered him to Steve Riddick, a 1976 Olympic gold medalist in the 4x100 relay and the Norfolk State coach, thinking Miller was too inexperienced. A year later, Nike approved Merritt's return to Miller. (Riddick, who coached Marion Jones and Tim Montgomery, among others, is in prison for his role in a counterfeit-check ring.)

Running for two people

Merritt ran a personal best (43.75) in Beijing and defeated 2004 Olympic and two-time world champion Jeremy Wariner by 0.99 of a second, the largest Olympic margin at that distance since 1896.

"Our goal is to be the best 400-meter runner ever," Miller says. "He's got all the tools. He's tall, fast, strong and has endurance. That's a dangerous combination."

The world record is 43.18 set by Michael Johnson in 1999. Merritt has the fastest time in the world this year (44.50).

The 6-2, 182-pound Merritt has a drive forged by the death of Antwan, who played trumpet and earned a music scholarship to Shaw University in Charlotte. At 18, Antwan died after he jumped out of a dorm window as a freshman in 1999, fearing he was going to be beaten by students who entered his room.

"When he passed, it was tough," says Merritt, 13 at the time. "He was at everything I did. It makes you look at life different. Life is not guaranteed. If you want to be the best, it's not going to come to you. That's where my work ethic comes from. I feel like I'm doing this for two people.

"There were a lot of things he never got a chance to do. While I'm here and can do something, there's no excuse why I shouldn't."

Merritt, who trains at Norfolk State and is working on his college degree in sport management at Old Dominion in Norfolk, speaks regularly to school and youth groups in Portsmouth, a city of about 100,000. The city is part of the Tidewater region, which has produced many well-known athletes, including Alonzo Mourning, Bruce Smith, Allen Iverson and David Wright.

"Whenever I do motivational speaking, they always say, 'Talk about the gangs,'" Merritt says. "A lot of kids today have the wrong role models. They're looking at the wrong people, the wrong things. They see violence. I'm trying to get them to see there are other ways. I try to be that positive role model."

Merritt understands the value of a good role model. As a middle schooler, he got to know NFL Hall of Fame inductee Bruce Smith, whose brothers-in-law coached Merritt's football and baseball teams. Merritt visited Smith's home and went on field trips arranged by Smith.

"I wanted what he had," Merritt says.

Portsmouth Mayor James Holley, who organized a September parade for Merritt, appreciates his efforts. Merritt has established a foundation that sponsored an indoor meet for kids.

"He's made such an impact on our community with his presence," Holley says. "He's a dynamite guy who could live anywhere in America. This is his home, man. He remembers all the little ways people here made his quality of life different and brought him to where he is.


"He calls it payback. He's always asking, 'What can I do?' He fires me up. We couldn't have a finer ambassador."

Merritt, who seemingly can't go anywhere in Portsmouth without knowing someone or someone recognizing him, ends his tour with stops in Olde Towne, at the Virginia Sports Hall of Fame and Roger Brown's Sports Bar. He notes a common denominator between those two spots and Wilson High — none has a picture of Merritt or a memento of his Beijing triumph. The hint of resentment indicates complacency isn't a problem for Merritt.

"I see a lot of people get to the top and the next year start to fall off," he says. "They fall off because that's all they wanted. The Olympics was just one goal of mine. I haven't been world champion yet. I have many more goals — more Olympics, world championships, world records. Last year was just a stepping stone."

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