

Portsmouth's Merritt sets sights on glory in Beijing

SUFFOLK

LaShawn Merritt has been working for this moment.

Barring a major upset or injury, he'll step onto the track at 8:55 p.m. Beijing time Aug. 21 for the Olympic 400-meter final as the main – some say only – threat to defending champion Jeremy Wariner.

A victory would make Merritt the second athlete from South Hampton Roads to claim an Olympic title in an individual event. Pernell "Sweetpea" Whitaker won boxing gold in 1984.

The track world has taken notice since Merritt's victory over Wariner at last month's Olympic Trials.

"Merritt looks like a good candidate to have some gold dangling from his neck in Beijing," said Eddie Pells of The Associated Press. Even the guy who coached Wariner to his gold medal likes Merritt's chances.

"If I was still coaching Jeremy, which I'm not, LaShawn would be the one that I would be the most concerned about, without a doubt," said Clyde Hart, whose pupils have won the past three Olympic gold medals in the 400 meters. "I think what he does have is that marvelous speed, and that's a major thing you have to be concerned about."

Only 22 years old, Merritt understands the stakes. "The Olympics is the biggest stage in track and field," he said.

But he believes his time has come.

"Four years ago, I won gold at the World Junior Championships in Italy," he said. "Four years later, I believe I can do the same thing on the pro level."

Early on,

Merritt didn't show much interest in track. He gravitated toward football and music, following the lead of his brother Antwan.

"Antwan was someone LaShawn looked up to," Merritt's mother, Brenda Stukes said. "When Twan played football, LaShawn played football. When Twan played the trumpet, LaShawn played it, too."

When Merritt was 13, his brother fell to his death from a dorm window at Shaw University in November 1999.

Merritt was devastated. He needed an outlet.

As a junior, Merritt decided to go out for the track team at Wilson High in Portsmouth.

"When God takes away something, He gives you something else," Stukes said. "And I think it was track because it kept LaShawn busy and kept us going."

Merritt excelled. He won the 400 in 48.04 and was runner-up in the 100 and 200 at the Group AAA state meet in his first season.

That summer he met Dwayne Miller, a local AAU track coach. The two formed a bond.

“When I first met LaShawn, I told him he never had to worry about me doing him wrong,” said Miller, who has been coaching track for 20 years. “All I asked is that he be honest with me.”

The two went to an Olympic Development camp in California where they learned how to polish Merritt’s form and fine-tune his mechanics.

The following season, Merritt blossomed into a national-caliber runner. At the Group AAA state meet, he won the 100 in a meet-record time of 10.47.

He also took the 400 at the national outdoor track and field championships in a stunning 45.38 seconds. That smashed the meet record by 36/hundredths of a second and ended up being the fastest high school time in the nation for 2004.

Merritt was surprised some doubted his ability coming into the meet, even though he had posted a 45.8 time earlier in the season.

“When I got there everyone was saying, ‘Who is this guy,’” Merritt recalled. “They were talking about every other runner except me. But I learned the first step to being successful is believing you can do it. And I believed I could do it.”

As an

18-year-old freshman at East Carolina, Merritt traveled to Fayetteville, Ark., to run the 400 meters at the Tyson Invitational against a field that included two Olympic medalists, a national champion and a world champion.

He clocked the then-second-fastest indoor 400 meters ever – 44.93. It’s still the fastest time run indoors by an athlete 19 or younger.

Later that summer, he went on to win three gold medals in the World Junior Championships. He left East Carolina and signed a \$2 million endorsement contract with Nike and went to train under former Norfolk State coach Steve Riddick at Nike’s urging, though Merritt still worked with Miller, too.

Merritt became part of a running stable that included former Olympians Marion Jones and Tim Montgomery. But Merritt broke ties with Riddick a short time later in what he described as a “blessing in disguise.”

Riddick, a gold medal winner in the 1976 Olympics, was sentenced this year to five years and three months in federal prison for his role in a check-kiting scheme.

Jones, who won five medals at the 2000 Olympics, received a six-month prison term for lying to federal authorities about her role in the check scheme and her use of steroids. She also was stripped of every medal she won dating to 2000 after admitting she took performance-enhancing drugs.

This month, Montgomery pleaded guilty to heroin distribution. He will face at least five more years in prison on top of the four he already is serving for counterfeiting checks.

Merritt is thankful he made the decision to leave Riddick’s stable, and he has remained loyal to Miller through it all, even though he says Nike officials don’t care for that relationship.

“Even as late as last year, when I got second at the World Championships, they were still saying I needed to come to the West Coast to train with one of their coaches,” he said. “I mean, I had just run 43.9, so why would they want me to change coaches?”

Miller, a former sprinter, was successful at Maury High School and Norfolk State but never achieved his Olympics goal.

To prepare for the Games, Miller quit his full-time job at WHRO-TV to focus on Merritt.

“I wanted him to achieve his goal, and I couldn’t do it coaching him part-time,” he said. “You do part-time coaching, and you get part-time results.”

Miller studied numerous hours to perfect Merritt’s strength, speed and endurance. He also kept a close eye on Merritt’s body to keep him from burnout and injury.

“I don’t believe in hanging around somebody just because they have something,” he said. “I believe you get there on your merit, no pun intended.”

Hunger helps, too.

Merritt was hungry to once again defeat reigning world and Olympic champion Wariner, this time at the Olympic Trials in July. Merritt had beaten Wariner in June in Berlin to snap Wariner’s nine-race winning streak.

“ But I didn’t let it go to my head,” Merritt said . “I knew I had to keep doing it over and over .”

On a windy Thursday evening in front of a crowd of more than 20,000 and a national-TV audience, Merritt lined up in lane 6, just outside the favored Wariner.

Merritt got out quickly and grabbed the lead in the first 200 meters. With 150 meters to go, he still was ahead, but he knew that was the time when Wariner usually makes his move and races past competitors. Merritt pumped his arms, lifted his knees and powered to the finish line – first .

“I think that opened up a lot of people’s eyes,” he said. “A lot of people thought he was invincible and that nobody could beat him. But me and my coach knew that if we put the race together that I could beat him.”

Despite two

recent losses to Wariner, Merritt knows he has closed the gap. Following Merritt’s victory over Wariner at the Olympic Trials, Wariner skipped the traditional victory lap with Merritt and third-place finisher David Neville. He also was a no-show at the postrace news conference.

When reporters caught up to Wariner later, he said, “LaShawn was the better man tonight. (The loss) is going to motivate me to work harder. The Trials is one thing, the Games is the bigger one.”

Merritt said there’s no animosity between him and Wariner , but they’re not close .

“Off the track we speak and are cordial,” he said. “It’s not like we get together and break bread together because, at the end of the day, when we line up, I’m trying to take food off his plate, and he’s trying to take food off mine.”

Merritt and Wariner will team in the 1,600 relay, in which they have a chance to win gold and perhaps set a world record.

Merritt knows much will be riding on how he does.

“Winning a gold medal would be great for me, my family, Portsmouth and Virginia,” he said. “It also would be great for my career to say I’m an Olympic gold medalist.”

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