

Merritt ready for another showdown with Wariner

U.S. rivals will square off in 400 meters

By Melinda Waldrop Newport News Daily Press
Tuesday, August 5, 2008

NEWPORT NEWS, Va. -- LaShawn Merritt is good with all the attention -- the interviews, the scrutiny, the glossy Sports Illustrated photo. He just knows it comes with a price.

"I've just got to know the position I'm in," said Merritt, a native of Portsmouth, Va., who took a giant step into the spotlight on July 3 by winning the 400 meters at the Olympic trials. "I can't do the things that an average 22-year-old does, because people are watching. So I've just got to be careful about what I do and who I hang around. . . . I know the caliber of athlete I am, and it's just something that comes with it. I'm just taking it all in and trying to make the best out of it. I love it. I love making people happy, being a role model just by doing what I love to do."

Doing what he loves to do also has helped Merritt create one of track and field's most entertaining rivalries going into the Beijing Olympics.

Merritt's victory in the trials, in 44 seconds flat, gave him his second win in three races against reigning Olympic 400 champion Jeremy Wariner, who finished second in 44.20.

Merritt bested Wariner in June in Berlin, and the two also clashed at the 2007 World Championships, where Merritt broke 44 seconds for the first time with a personal record of 43.96, pushing Wariner to a personal-best 43.45.

Wariner, managed by two-time Olympic champion and 400 world-record holder Michael Johnson, said after the trials that he's still the gold medal favorite in Beijing, pointing out that his personal record is faster than Merritt's.

"We're not enemies. We're competitors," said Merritt, who now lives in Suffolk. "We know each other's talents. The respect is there, but it's not a buddy-type thing. It's not a buddy-buddy deal, what's going on at the end of a race. Neither one of us are poor sportsmen. At the end of the day, it's OK, we're gonna line up, I'm gonna try my best to win, he's gonna try his best to win. When we cross the finish line, whoever wins was the best person that day."

Merritt's victory at the trials was bittersweet, coming less than a week after what would have been his late older brother Antwan's birthday, June 29. Merritt, who turned 22 on June 27, dedicated the race to Antwan, who died in 1999 after jumping from his dorm room at Shaw University in Raleigh, N.C., during a fight.

"This was for both our birthdays," Merritt told USA Today after his victory.

Family is important to Merritt, who bought his mother a house shortly after turning pro at age 18. But he said his relatives will root for him at home in front of the television instead of making the long trip to Beijing.

Merritt's agent and coach, Dwayne Miller, will be on hand as Merritt and Wariner stage a highly anticipated rematch.

"I know it's not only gonna be him, but it's gonna be eight men who want to be No. 1 who are going to line up in the Olympic finals," Merritt said. "May the best man win. I'm gonna give it my all to represent Virginia well, to represent my family and myself well. I've been waiting four years for this."

