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Thoughts of brother never far for gold medalist Merritt

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BEIJING - LaShawn Merritt took that rivalry and shoved it.

In the 400-meter race of the Summer Games, with 85,000 people screaming a half world away from home, American Merritt demolished defending world and Olympic champion Jeremy Wariner Thursday night.

It put to rest any notion that Wariner stands head and shoulders above the world's 400-meter gang.

Now, it's Merritt, 22, in his first Olympics, who turned in the fastest time of 2008 with a 43.75 and beat Wariner by a full three yards as he crossed the finish line. Wariner, with a 44.74, barely edged another American, David Neville, in the U.S. sweep.

The 400 is an event an American has won in every Olympics but two since 1956. Merritt did it convincingly and surprisingly.

"I wanted it," he said.

He got it Thursday. As Merritt, from Portsmouth, Va., turned after about 300 meters in Lane Three towards the finish line, he looked to this right.

"I didn't see him," Merritt said Wariner.

Wariner, of Waco, Tex., was fading over in Lane Seven even as Merritt was surging toward the end of a journey that began in sadness and ended Thursday night in Olympic gold and a heartfelt dedication.

Past the finish line, Merritt put his youthful face in his hands. He squatted on the orange track of the massive Bird's Nest stadium. He banged on the track with both hands in primal celebration.

Then, he thought of his big brother, Antwan, who died nine years ago in a tragic college dormitory incident.

"I told him I was going to do it," Merritt said of his still private whisperings to his brother, who was 19 when he was killed. "He got me through it, and I'm dedicating this race to him."

It was Antwan's death that started LaShawn in track.

"When you lose someone that close to you, you need something to help heal," said Brenda Stukes, Antwan's and LaShawn's mother, on the phone from Portsmouth celebrating her youngest son's victory. "Track was it for Shawn."

Merritt got good. He wound up winning six indoor and outdoor Virginia state high school championships, the 200 and 400 national schoolboy titles. too. He was the Gatorade High School Track Athlete of 2004.

Thursday was another milepost. It came as he and Wariner had built a nifty rivalry, one that the sport of track and field needs more of.

Last year at the World Championships, Merritt finished second to Wariner. But not until last June had Merritt ever defeated Wariner. And then he did it again at the U.S. Olympic trials seven weeks ago. Afterwards, in pre-Olympic races in Europe, Wariner got the upper hand, defeating Merritt twice.

There was even some trash talking at the Bird's Nest stadium earlier in the week after both qualified for the finals.

"It's time to show down and throw down," Merritt said after being the fastest qualifier into the finals.

Wariner countered: "A lot of people doubt me with the way LaShawn is running. But I never doubt myself."

Merritt didn't just talk. He went back to the drawing board. He kept analyzing his race and the race tactics of others here in Beijing. He noticed something that he'd been doing wrong in the preliminaries. He saw that shorter competitors were taking fewer steps over the 400 meters than he at 6-3.

"I wasn't using what I had," Merritt said. "I decided I should broaden my stride . . . The person who wanted it the most was going to cross the finish line first."

Of his race, Wariner said: "I got out like I wanted to through the 200 (meters). When I tried to make my move like I usually do, coming off the turn, it just wasn't there."

Wariner was out of gas. Merritt was cruising on premium and said: "I won a gold medal and I'm happier than I've ever been."

Still, there was a pinch of sadness.

LaShawn Merritt has said throughout his career that he believes the spirit of Antwan runs with him. Usually, before a race he performs a ritual to honor Antwan. He will say a silent prayer. He will take the index and middle finger of his right hand and kiss them. He will point his fingers to the sky.

It's all about his brother Antwan, who died on a strange November night in 1999. According to published reports, an earlier scuffle spilled into Antwan Merritt's dorm room at Shaw University in Charlotte, N.C. Prosecutors said that he was attacked, put in a headlock and, apparently, fearing for his life, leaped from his eighth-floor window. He died later. Three men were acquitted of manslaughter, and charges against two others were dismissed.

LaShawn Merritt was 13 then and stopped playing baseball, the sport his brother always watched, and turned to track and field. By the time he was a senior, he won six indoor and outdoor state championships and won national scholastic indoor and outdoor titles in the 200 and 400. He was named the Gatorade national high school track athlete of the year.

Antwan was there, LaShawn said.

"A lot of times, I felt like I was being pushed to the finish line," said Merritt. "It was like he was running with me. I knew he was guiding me."

Merritt went to East Carolina University on a scholarship but soon turned pro, signing with Nike and chasing Wariner.

"I've waited four years for this moment," Merritt said after his victory.

But Thursday night, LaShawn Merritt performed his ritual about a half-hour after the race. That's when the public address announcer declared: "Gold medalist and Olympic champion LaShawn Merritt!"

Merritt smiled broadly and kissed the first two fingers on each hand and raised them toward the heavens. He took his place on the top pedestal of the Olympic medal podium. The gold medal was placed around his neck. It was as if it belonged to Antwan, too. *Freelancer Jay Weiner is in Beijing covering the Olympics for SportingNews.com.*

