

August 22, 2008

With 400 Gold, Merritt Eases Disappointment Over Relay Failures

By [LYNN ZINSER](#)

BEIJING — Just when the United States [track and field](#) team appeared to hit rock bottom at these Olympics — and take your pick between when the men’s and the women’s 4x100-meter relay teams dropped the baton Thursday night as to when that was — LaShawn Merritt strolled into the Olympic stadium for what he believed was his moment. Merritt wore his confidence like a shield, fending off the chaos that had enveloped the American relays, holding off any thought that his country’s team was flailing.

Merritt stormed through the 400 meters and grabbed a commanding victory over the defending Olympic champion, [Jeremy Wariner](#). Behind them something almost as thrilling happened: the unheralded American David Neville dived for the finish line, grabbing third place by a hundredth of a second. It was an American sweep at America’s lowest moment.

“For Neville to come through and get third was great,” Merritt said. “He dove for it, he gave it his all. That’s what the Games are all about.”

The sweep in the 400 was followed by a silver-bronze finish in the 110 hurdles by David Payne and David Oliver, and when Brian Clay held on to the lead in the decathlon after five events, what once looked like a disastrous evening for the Americans took a brighter turn.

“In the Olympic final, you’ve got to bring your A game,” the 22-year-old Merritt said. “I said I wasn’t going to let anything get in my way or get me off track. I stuck to what I said I was going to do.”

Add those finishes to [Allyson Felix](#)’s silver medal in the 200 earlier and the United States flag was raised six times. It eased a bit of the sting.

“It’s really upsetting as a whole for American Olympians,” said the sprinter [Tyson Gay](#), who dropped the baton during the final exchange in the men’s relay. “It’s been tough. I think we just understand it’s been a bad meet.”

The low point was actually a matched set of low points. In the first round of the 4x100 relays, the American teams needed to do little more than show up and pass the baton successfully three times. Neither the men nor the women could manage it.

First came the men. Darvis Patton ran a good third leg and tried to pass to Gay, but the baton hit the heel of Gay’s hand and bounced away. Gay turned around with a look of sheer disbelief, a man who won three golds at the world championship a year ago but who will leave here without a medal and without having reached a final.

“It probably was my fault,” said Gay, who failed to advance out of the semifinals of the 100 last week. “If it hits your hand, you should have it. I’m a veteran. I’ve never dropped a stick in my life.”

Stunningly, the women’s team followed with exactly the same result. [Torri Edwards](#) seemed to have an even cleaner pass at the end of her third leg, hitting [Lauryn Williams](#) square in the hand with the baton. But it too bounced away.

“I’m not quite sure exactly what happened,” Williams said. “We came out here to compete, came out here to run our hearts out, get some revenge toward Jamaica.

“The whole Games hasn’t gone as planned for USA Track & Field. It’s just unfortunate.”

Both relay team squandered a chance to grab some glory in a meet being dominated by Jamaican sprinters. In addition to the headline-grabbing performances by [Usain Bolt](#) in the 100 and 200, the Jamaican women swept the 100 and on Thursday night won gold and bronze in the 200. The defending Olympic women’s 200 champion, Veronica Campbell-Brown, beat Felix handily in that race, one Felix had desperately hoped to win after winning the last two world championships. Campbell-Brown won in 21.74 seconds with Felix second in 21.93.

Kerron Stewart finished third, holding off the American Muna Lee by .01 seconds.

“No disrespect to the Americans, but this is the Jamaican Olympics,” Stewart said.

With the American relay teams out, Jamaica has little in the way of a challenge in those events, aside from getting the baton around safely. The Jamaican men seem poised to better the world record, with Bolt running anchor and the former world-record holder in the 100 [Asafa Powell](#) in the mix as well.

“We were looking forward to running against them in the final because they’re a very good team,” Powell said of the Americans.

The relay disappointment troubled USA Track & Field’s new chief executive, Doug Logan, who released a statement saying the organization would review its procedures for preparing for Olympic events, including relays.

But just when things looked bleakest for the American team, Merritt, provided a one-man confidence boost.

He said he was not upset by the relays failures. Nor by the rainstorm earlier in the night.

“I said, ‘Let it rain,’ ” Merritt said. “The harder it rained, the harder I was going to run. It stopped raining, I said, ‘I’m still going to run harder than I ever ran.’ ”

He also ran faster than he had ever run, crossing the finish line in 43.75.

The surprise was not necessarily how well Merritt ran — he has beaten Wariner twice this year, including at the United States Olympic trials — but by how soundly he dispatched Wariner, who before this year had not lost a major 400 in more than three years. Wariner was nearly a full second back at 44.74.

Merritt looked strong throughout and off the final turn he was alone on the straightaway. Wariner tried to

respond, but he had no kick left. Merritt sailed away down the stretch.

“I knew I had the race when I was coming down the homestretch and looked over and didn’t see anybody,” Merritt said. “Actually I looked over and saw like a pole or something and thought it was somebody else, but it wasn’t him and I brought it on in from there.”

Wariner looked on in disbelief as Merritt celebrated and Neville picked himself off the track. Eventually, Merritt came back toward Wariner and they shook hands.

“I don’t know what to say,” Wariner said. “I ran the best I could. I didn’t have nothing left and I didn’t give up. I ran exactly how I wanted to, I just didn’t have enough left at the end. I’m disappointed.”

He was not quite as disappointed as the Americans who walked away with no medals, a list that includes Gay and Williams. And at least Wariner has another chance at a gold, in the 4x400 relay.

“It’s a strange Games,” said Michael Johnson, Wariner’s agent and the holder of world record before Bolt broke it Wednesday night. “A lot of people supposed to do well, not doing it. Jeremy’s at the top of that list.”

But from the United States’ standpoint, at least the man taking Wariner’s place atop the podium was an American. And a confident one, at that.

[Copyright 2008 The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)
