

LaShawn Merritt

by Jon Hendershott

In the fastest 400 he has ever run so early in the season, LaShawn Merritt rolled to a 44.44 victory at the Drake Relays, a clocking he matched at the Diamond League opener in Doha. The times continued his roll from last season, when he won his fourth U.S. title, second Worlds crown and fourth global 4x4 gold.

The 27-year-old Virginia native is in his second season working with coach Loren Seagrave in Florida, an obviously beneficial pairing:

T&FN: How did you start working with Loren?

Merritt: My former coach Dwayne Miller got offered a job in Saudi Arabia. It was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for him, so with him gone, I needed somewhere to train.

I went from Portsmouth to Florida in '11, thinking I'd train with Angelo Taylor. But he decided to move back home to Atlanta. The season was about to start, so I stayed and started working with Loren at the IMG Academy in Sarasota. He is a great coach.

T&FN: Early this year, you ran a couple of 400s and a 200 in Australia and then just blew one out at Drake. What did that 44.44 tell you about your shape for the '14 season versus other years?

Merritt: Well, training had been going well and it was definitely a major race to encounter those kinds of athletes early in the season. I had never matched up with anybody like that so early.

With nobody having run yet, nobody knew where anybody else was in terms of preparation. We didn't know who was going to take it seriously.

But I felt, "OK, I'm here, I'm feeling great, so just let me go for it." The race felt great. I got out good and finished strong and 44.44 was what it was.

T&FN: You've got the defending champion's free pass to the Worlds in Beijing next year. Does that affect your plan, really over the next two years?

Merritt: Things are coming to where I feel like my body—my surroundings and my training—means these can be the years when I run my fastest.

So outside of trying to peak for a major championship, I also have the "I want to run fast" itch. I've run a lot and won a lot, but I haven't really dropped that mid-43 time, or

43-low, that will kind of put the stamp on the idea, "Hey, this guy is the truth." [Laughs]

So we have been dissecting the race. At this point, it's just a matter of small tweaks. And having people around me who really know what's going on in approaching the race so I can drop one of those 43.2s, or faster. And eventually a World Record.

T&FN: Back in '09, you said when you turned pro in early '07 as a college frosh you really didn't know how to run the race. You were a lot younger then, mentally, physically and in terms of experience. But when would you say you had really learned how to run the 400?

Merritt: I'd say that in '08 I really started to come into my own as far as what type of 400 runner I was. Being more a speed type of guy, I know I can cover the first 200 faster than anybody else in the world. So I had to use that to my advantage. And I also have strength.

Knowing that, but also constantly learning... learning is so difficult at times because there is more than one way to get to different goals. Different coaches have their different theories and philosophies.

So I have just taken everything and tried to mold and figure out what will be best for me. And I have had the luxury of being able to compete in different races and experiment on different phases of the race. I don't have to run every race the same each time.

T&FN: Did that happen in Moscow last year? After Kirani James had won in Daegu and

London, was Moscow your best chance to get back on the top of the podium?

Merritt: I think it was, even if I never felt like the underdog. I've always felt, "This is what I do; this is how I train. It's time to go out and handle business."

Merritt In A Nutshell

•**Personal:** LaShawn Lorenzo Merritt was born June 27, 1986, in Portsmouth, Virginia; 6-2½/185 (1.89/84)

•**PRs:** 100—10.47 ('04). 200—19.98 ('07). 300—31.30 ('09) (3, 3 W; 2, 2 A). 400—43.74 ('13) (5, x W, A)

•**Schools:** Wilson HS (Portsmouth) '04; attended East Carolina & Norfolk State; now represents Nike

•**Coaches:** Roscoe Coles, Dwayne Miller (HS); Bill Carson (East Carolina); Steve Riddick, Miller, Loren Seagrave (pro)

•**Major Meets:** 200—1)USJ '04. 400—1)USJ, 1)WJ '04; 4)US '05; 2)USi, 2)US '06; 2)US, 2)WC '07; 1)OT, 1)OG '08; 1)US, 1)WC '09; 2)WC '11; 1)OT, dnf-h)OG '12; 1)US, 1)WC '13.

4x1—1)WJ '04 (38.66 WJR). 4x4—1)WJ '04 (3:01.09 WJR); 1)WC '05 (heats); 1)WCi, 1)WCup '06; 1)WC '07; 1)OG '08; 1)WC '09; 1)WC '11; 1)WC '13

•**World/U.S. Rankings:** 200—5, 4 ('06); 7, 5 ('07); x, 7 ('08); 7, 4 ('09); x, 7 ('11); x, 6 ('13) 400—x, 9 ('04); 10, 5 ('05); 3, 2 ('06); 2, 2 ('07); 1, 1 ('08); 1, 1 ('09); 2, 1 ('11); 3, 1 ('12); 1, 1 ('13)



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MARK SHEARMAN

In Daegu, it was only my second race of '11. But the 400 is a race where you have to go through the year to get into a rhythm. You can be in the best of shape, but if you don't have that rhythm and haven't run races, it affects you. I was in great shape, but I hadn't had any races.

So I was pleased that it went right down to the finish line... Well, I wasn't pleased because I wanted to win. But there was only 0.03 between Kirani and me and considering everything, I thought, "OK, I live to fight another day."

Then in '12, it was just unfortunate that I had that hamstring injury just two weeks before the Olympics. But I had been undefeated the whole year up until Monaco when I hurt my leg. I thought, "OK, things happen."

But 2013 was my chance to show everybody, "I'm healthy; I've had some races; let's do this."

T&FN: *Was there any thinking on your part of, "I want to beat Kirani because he's the No. 1 guy now and I want to get into that spot?"*

Or do you even think like that going into big races?

Merritt: It wasn't that I wanted to especially beat him. He didn't even get 2nd. But here was a field of the top people in the world, who all were taking it really seriously. But I wanted to beat everybody. It wasn't just about Kirani.

It was, "It's time, on this world stage that I haven't been on in a while, to show the world the work I've been doing and who is, I would say, 'the man.'" [Laughs] So it was time to show the work I had put in.

T&FN: *So far in your career, is it possible that Moscow was your most rewarding race? Or if not, what has been?*

Merritt: Moscow was

important, yes. Actually there have been a couple more, too. The Beijing Olympics were nice because Jeremy Wariner had been dominant for so long.

We went back and forth beating each other in the season, but in the race that mattered most, at the Games, I won by a whole second. I had a great race then. But I heard some people say, "Oh, Wariner just had a bad race." So winning the next year at the Worlds in Berlin was another great race.

In Moscow, I was feeling good and was ready to run, so let's perform well. I just wanted to go out and execute the race. And I also know the importance of both the Games and the Worlds in sport in general. I wanted to get there in Moscow and bring my name back to life.

T&FN: *What do you think has been the toughest part about running the 400 for you to learn?*

Merritt: [Sighs] Hmm, that's a good question. [Laughs] One thing in the race itself has been learning to be relaxed in the later stages. Understanding how important form is when you get into those critical zones late in the race. It's not always that when you feel like you're running fast that you actually do run faster.

Some people try to run fast, but by doing that they just tighten up. So there is the whole balance of keeping form and being confident, then being able to have great instincts while in the race.

In Moscow, it also was a matter of going back to what I already knew, mentally telling myself, "Even though a lot is on the line, you've been here before. It's still 400 meters. You're supposed to be here. Now go out and handle your business."

T&FN: *Did knowing you had the '13 Worlds to aim for help you to get over the emotional hurt of London injury?*

Merritt: It did. London was terrible, but I'm a guy who is all about forward movement. Unfortunate things are going to happen in life but that's just the way life is. But I just try to take life in stride. Not every day is going to be a great day, but you live for tomorrow.

There were people in my life who were close to me who never got a chance to do anything with their lives. So I understand that you can't keep your head down as long as you know, "Tomorrow is another day and it's not the end of the world." That's just the mentality I have toward life.

T&FN: *You have said "back when I was younger" and now you're an "ancient" 27. But do you feel like the "senior" U.S. 400-meter guy?*

Merritt: I do, especially being that social media is so big now. I feel there are just more distractions now for the younger runners. When I was their age, I had to be really focused because Jeremy was dominating the event.

I felt like I was stronger and faster, so I had to study a lot to figure out what I was doing wrong. Not necessarily wrong in training, but in the race itself. I felt like a lot of the time I was beating myself.

Now, I still have that focus. There aren't a lot of distractions going on in my life. I understand how important focus is; how important self-

Merritt — continued

discipline is and how stress can take a toll on your body. So I train, I eat, I sleep, I compete, then I train again.

I don't have a lot of distractions because I know I'm only going to be able to do this for a small portion of my life. When you're 20 and 21, you might think you won't retire until you're 30 and that seems like a long time. But the time goes by really fast. And I also know that at 35, that isn't the end of my life. This is only a small part of my life, so I have to maximize this gift I've been given.

T&FN: *What knowledge do you feel you can pass along to the younger guys?*

Merritt: Right now I do feel like I'm the leader, so "watch me" when we're at the major championships. Even at regular competitions. They have heard and seen the focus I have; the time and energy I put into my craft. It's almost like I don't want to tell them *too* much because we're still competitors.

If they get a whole lot better, I'm going to have to run a whole lot faster every time. [Laughs] At the same time, I do talk to them on the level of "You have to stay focused. This is what we do, so let's go out and represent the U.S."

T&FN: *The 4 x 400 is a special opportunity for 400 runners. You led off at the '07 Worlds and '08 Olympics, then anchored at the last three Worlds, so you have experience at both ends of the race. But is the 4x4 a unique leadership chance, especially considering the great U.S. history in the event?*

Merritt: It is. I enjoy every time I get to link up with the guys in the 4x4. For one, it's less pressure. My speech to them isn't anything crazy. It's just: "Everyone handle your job, tend to business on your leg and trust the next man. If everybody handles their business, we'll do just fine."

I guess that's how I am anyway: you go out and handle your business. I don't give them a speech on what we have done in the past because I'm more of a "present" type of guy. "This is what's going on now. Do your job. You're a grown man—even if you're 18 or 19,

you're a grown man in this business."

That's what I had to learn really quick. When I turned pro at 18, the other guys were like 25, 26. There were some older guys who actually had families. If I thought I was doing this race just for me, the guy in the next lane might be trying to win because he had a wife and a kid. It was serious for him, so I learned it was serious business.

You go out and treat it like a job. You chose to become a professional athlete, so if you need to mature a lot quicker, then that's what you need to do.

T&FN: *With that free pass to the '15 Worlds, have you thought about running the Worlds next year in the same Beijing stadium where you had such a great victory in '08?*

Merritt: I can't say I have, but that's going to be cool. [Laughs] Mentally, it will be a thing for me of, "I already handled business here once before." Now I'm older, faster, wiser, so I can just go out and execute the race again.

You know, I think I'm a simple guy. I understand how to handle the present and I understand how being mentally strong helps you in this sport. So putting together the mental strength and being able to really focus on the present are two really key things.

T&FN: *And that's a learned ability? You*

make mistakes but learn from them and come back stronger.

Merritt: And move forward. You may not run a race as good as you wanted to, but you learn to move forward. You must learn from whatever happens. □

DAVID PETERSON



Merritt took down arch-rival James at Drake

The U.S. 400 Corps

With 30-year-old Jeremy Wariner battling injuries in recent seasons, 27-year-old LaShawn Merritt is now the senior member of the always-formidable U.S. 400 corps. His assessment of the up-and-coming generation of American 1-lappers:

Tony McQuay (24): "For him not to make the final in London, then to win the silver in Moscow, was impressive to me. I honestly think he was a lot more focused last year."

"He's still in the process of his transitioning from college to pro, but after that silver last year, I think he's ready to really run now."

Gino Hall (20): "He had great success at the Youth and Junior levels and, of course,

he's still in college and is going to enjoy that. He is running very well on that level. It was great for him last year to compete with us on the 4x4. We needed him and he ran a great leg.

"In the next couple of years, Gino definitely will be somebody to battle with."

Bryshon Nellum (25): "He is a guy who hasn't really showed the world yet what he can do. He got hurt last year at nationals and didn't make the team. When he gets together, I'm sure the world will see more of him. But the first thing I always say when people talk about Bryshon is, 'That dude can run.'"

Josh Mance (22): "He is a really cool guy who has a very unique running style, but he hasn't found out yet what type of quartermiler he is. I told him, 'You need to get somewhere

so you can focus on just the sport, because you have a talent.'

"With his running style—a long gallop; a long stride without a quick turnover—he needs to get with someone who can give him specific training and so he can work out his own race plan."

David Verburg (22): "He's almost like [Luguelín] Santos because he runs hard every time. David tells me, 'Man, I have to run hard because I'm not as tall as you.' [Verburg tapes at 5-6/1.68 compared to 6-2½/1.89 for Merritt.] He is great for a relay, because you know he'll run hard."

"He just turned pro and with a young guy, it takes experience to develop his own way to run the event."