

# Aries Merritt

Medical problems almost ended the WR holder's career this year



by Jon Hendershott

**B**y its very color, a gold medal shines more brightly than a bronze. But sometimes, that 3<sup>rd</sup>-place award can be more satisfying than its victorious counterpart. Just ask Aries Merritt.

The American hurdler already has his big gold, for winning in London. And he owns a World Record plaque for his 12.80.

But the bronze he earned in Beijing this summer has given Merritt a different level of personal achievement—because four days after medaling in China he underwent kidney transplant surgery. The new organ was donated by older sister LaToya Hubbard and was necessitated by a 2-year illness that saw Merritt's renal function drop below 20% at its worst.

Some 6 weeks post-surgery, Merritt says his function is "above 90%" and—not surprisingly for the highly motivated hurdler—he is anxious to return to training to prep for an Olympic defense in Rio in about 10 months.

He shared his thoughts from his home in Chandler, Arizona, where he trains with coach Andreas Behm at the Altis Center:

**T&FN:** So how are you feeling right now?

**Merritt:** It's still a little sore in the incision area. But other than that, I feel fine. Neither of my kidneys were removed; another one

was added. You can't replace a kidney that has damaged filtration, so you have to insert a new kidney in a different area. Since my kidneys didn't work, there didn't need to be additional surgery to take them out.

**T&FN:** About 4 years ago, you and Andreas began to revamp your start, switching to 7 strides to the first hurdle rather than 8. That worked out brilliantly in '12 with the World Indoor and Olympic titles and setting the World Record. With all that

that remake entailed—both the mental and physical demands—is it possible that experience carried over to you coping with literally a life-and-death physical problem?

**Merritt:** It's definitely possible that it did carry over. That change I went through in '12 definitely made me a stronger athlete mentally. I'm very mentally strong at this point in my career, so I definitely feel that played a role in my performance at Worlds and then in my recovery from the surgery. It's played a big role in my overall development as an athlete.

**T&FN:** You revealed before Beijing that you started feeling poorly back in '13 before the Worlds in Moscow. What did you feel like back then?

**Merritt:** It was very odd; I just felt like I couldn't finish my race. My training in Linz before Moscow was phenomenal and I had come off a Diamond League win in Paris. All the best guys who would be at Worlds were in that race and I beat all of them.

My body finally had started to wake up. I had pulled a hamstring three times and had been in Germany for months getting treated by Dr. [Hans-Wilhelm] Müller-Wohlfahrt. The week before USAs, he cleared me to run and I came back to the U.S. and made the team.

And I made it with basically no training. I

## Merritt In A Nutshell

- Personal:** Aries D'Andre Merritt was born July 24, 1985, in Chicago, Illinois; 6-0/170 (1.83/77)
- PRs:** 60H—7.43i(A) '12; 110H—12.80 WR '12; 400H—51.94 '04
- Schools:** Wheeler HS (Marietta, Georgia) '03; Tennessee '07; now represents Nike
- Coaches:** Chad Walker (HS); Vince Anderson, Norbert Elliott (Tennessee); Anderson, Andreas Behm (pro)
- Major Meets:** 60H—5h)NCi '04; 5)NCi '05; 1)NCi '06; 8)USi '07; 1)USi, 1)WCi '12. 110H—4)NC, 2)USJr, 1)WJr '04; 5)NC, 7)US '05; 1)NC, 6)US '06; 6)US '07; 4)OT '08; 3)US, 4h)WC '09; 3h)US '10; 2)US, =5)WC '11; 1)OT, 1)OG '12; 3)US, 6)WC '13; 3)US, 3)WC '15
- World/U.S. Rankings:** 110H—6/4 '06; x/7 '07; 6/5 '08; 7/4 '09; 5/3 '11; 1/1 '12; 5/4 '13; x/7 '14; ?/? '15.

was so nervous; that was one of the hardest teams ever to make in my career because I didn't know what to expect.

I had done such amazing things in '12, but I had no idea what might happen in '13 because I wasn't fit enough. So I ran that race on all heart in the final to make that team. Then I ran in Paris and then my training in Linz was at 13-flat pace for 11 and 12 hurdles.

So I thought that I would easily win Worlds, but it didn't happen. When I got to Moscow and ran the first round, I knew something was wrong. The effort I put out should have been around 13-flat, but it was 13.34 and I wondered, "What the heck was that?"

Then in the semi, there was a crazy thing: some of us thought there was a false start but they let it go. The rest of the field was literally five steps out on me. So I had to put out a really big effort just to make it to the final—and that was the effort I wanted to use in the final, which was later that same day.

The final proved to me that I had some internal issue I didn't know about because usually I'm clean over the hurdles. But I hit No. 7 really badly and almost veered over into Jason Richardson's lane. I got back into my lane but it was just a crappy race overall and I ended up 6<sup>th</sup>.

The odd thing was, after that final, I kept hitting the same seventh hurdle in the last four races of my season—and in exactly the same way. I hit it with my [right] trail leg every time. I was just running out of power.

Also, I take off farther out from the hurdle than anyone else. Others take off about 7-feet [2.13m] from the hurdle but I take off about 9-feet [2.75m] away. At that point, my trail leg was suffering because I didn't have the strength to take the hurdle cleanly. And I could also feel that my energy level was plummeting.

**T&FN:** Looking back now, was it difficult to cope then with not knowing what was behind the physical problems?

**Merritt:** It was, but I just put it to not having enough training that year. Andreas and I thought we were undertrained; we had missed almost four months of training because of the hamstring injuries. So I was running off the residual training from '12, but that residual will eventually run out.

**T&FN:** When did you first go to doctors?

**Merritt:** Right after the end of the '13 season, I was really sick and I went to emergency at the Mayo Clinic in Phoenix. I had terrible pain in my stomach; I couldn't keep anything down. It felt like my insides were being spun around. I started having edema in my legs.

Right there in the ER, as soon as they analyzed my blood and urine, they knew that my kidneys were failing. I was leaking massive amounts of protein into my urine, a sign that my kidneys were failing rapidly. They did a biopsy the next day that confirmed my kidney function was under 15%.

**T&FN:** What was your reaction? Any "relief" to finally know what the problem was?

**Merritt:** I was just, "What do you mean?" Then I was, "How do we fix this?" They talked about dialysis, but I said that wasn't going to work. They said I wouldn't run again because I would have to start dialysis in a couple of days.

They would give me a few days to process all they had told me. But I also knew that the type of kidney disease I had doesn't get better; it only gets worse. Once they are scarred, they're scarred for life. Your kidneys are just on a slow, descending path.

**T&FN:** Then how did it turn out that you competed in both '14 and '15?

**Merritt:** The treatment for the other problem I had, Parvovirus [see sidebar], restored my kidney function to around 55–60%. We thought that would be enough, because as long as you're over 20% function, you can live. But once you drop below 20%, you're in the danger zone and it's critical you get immediate treatment.

The catch was that with my filtration already damaged, my training actually expedited the destruction of my remaining kidney function. From 55–60% in '14, I was down to about 17% function before Beijing.

**T&FN:** So considering the serious medical situation, how reassuring was it to get 3<sup>rd</sup> at this year's USAs to make your fourth straight outdoor Worlds team?

**Merritt:** Well, it wasn't so much reassuring as it was a relief. [laughs] I was so nervous about it all. Once they told me before the Pre Classic how low my kidney function was, I had all these things going through my head. I had to sit down, refocus and get my life together and decide what I would do.

Would I go on with the season, or stop then and try to rush a transplant? But I decided to go ahead and compete this season, because they ended up rushing the transplant as fast as they could anyway. It's a very long, involved process and it would take some months to get everything approved.

I decided I would compete at Nationals and try to make the team. Then I would go to Worlds and hope to win a medal. It was like "hope-hope-hope."

So when I went to USAs, I was ready to run physically, but only kinda-sorta mentally. I knew my body couldn't handle multiple rounds back-to-back. Like the USA semis and final were on the same day.

But at the Worlds, we had one round every day for three days and that played to my advantage. If we had had two rounds on the

same day in Beijing, I probably wouldn't have medaled. Due to the amount of strain it put on my body, at that time it took me longer to recover than most people. But I got 3<sup>rd</sup> and I was very, very happy I made the team. But it was so stressful.

**T&FN:** Before Worlds, you ran in three European races but you said you would hit the sixth or seventh hurdle in each of them. Was that due to running out of power?

**Merritt:** I think it was a combination of me running out of power, but also in London we had to run heats before the final. I knew that I was running out of steam, but it also was a case of me trying to just overpower the event. I tried to outrun everyone because I'm faster.

But that's not the case in the hurdles because the hurdle will beat you up every time. I was neglecting my technique while trying to outspurt everyone between the hurdles and

## A Viral Problem As Well

*Aries Merritt's medical problem was two-fold:*

"The kidney problem was a genetic disorder. But I also had a virus, Parvovirus B-19, in my body and it had attacked my kidneys and bone marrow. The first aim for the doctors was to eliminate the Parvovirus. Parvo is everywhere and is highly contagious.

"The doctors felt the Parvo was the start of my kidney problem. Parvovirus causes massive amounts of scarring, which is why my filtration was really bad. The treatment they had me on, IVIG, was actually healing my kidneys at the same time it was attacking the Parvovirus.

"But when they finally knew I needed a transplant, they just asked me what day would work for me. The Beijing final was on August 28 and I said I could be home the next day—but if I medaled, then staying for the medal ceremony would delay me one day.

"Right away, they checked with family members because there is a higher probability of finding a match with a family member; a greater chance of success. But there is no guarantee, so you still have to go through all kinds of tests, first to determine if a person had any history of kidney problems. If they do, then they are automatically eliminated from being a match. If there is any kind of disease that could be transmitted to you from their kidney, then they're eliminated. So there is so much that goes into it.

"But luckily my sister had had a baby a year before and she had a clean bill of health. She was still taking her prenatal medications because she was breast feeding and wanted the baby to have all those nutrients. [laughs] She actually was healthier than I was!"

get to the finish before everyone else. But that's not how the hurdles work.

I told Andreas, "I'm not running cleanly. We need to focus on my technique." So we spent the majority of my training before Worlds just working on technique. When my technique was better, then we started adding speed.

That's why I was in such a different place at Worlds, because we had gone back to the



ANDREW MCGILL/ANAHAINPHOTO.COM

## Merritt — continued

basics in training for six weeks. You forget the basics sometimes because you're so wrapped up in other things. In my case, it was the physical issues. I thought, "I'm going to overpower this and beat everyone." But that doesn't always work, especially in the hurdles.

**T&FN:** *In Beijing, you ran 13.08 in your semi, your seasonal best to then. And then you ran 13.04 in the final, but to get under 13.10 in the semi in your only race that day must have been tremendously encouraging.*

**Merritt:** My entire objective for Beijing was clean hurdling: "Don't hit a single hurdle; make sure you're incredibly clean; make sure you nail your positions; get your posture right." Everything had to be perfect because I was already at a disadvantage. If I didn't hurdle perfectly, I had no chance to medal—or even make the final. But if I did everything right, I'd have a really good chance.

After the rounds, I just told myself not to worry about anyone else. I literally had tunnel vision for the entire championships. I wasn't worried who was to my left or right. I just focused on the 10 hurdles in front of me and clearing those barriers as cleanly as I could, while trying to maintain some type of rhythm.

**T&FN:** *When you crossed the line, were you certain you had medaled?*

**Merritt:** To be honest, I thought I had won! [laughs] I was so tunnel-visioned, that after I cleared the last hurdle, I didn't see anyone on either side of me. Coach [Vince] Anderson told me he thought I had settled; because I didn't feel anyone, I didn't press to the line.

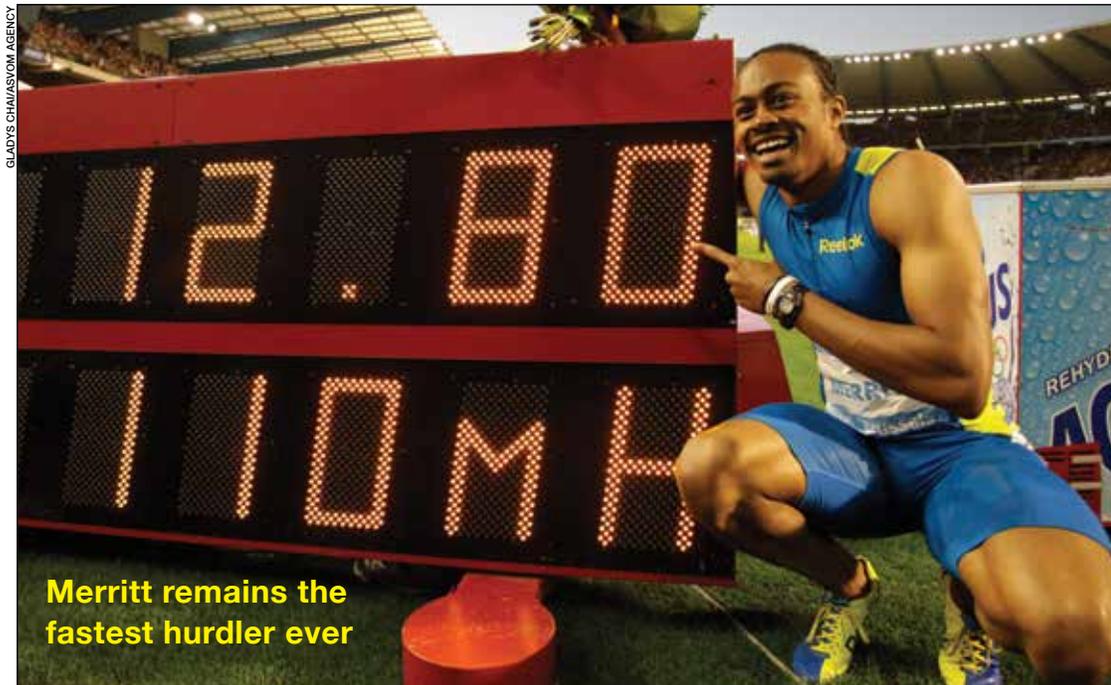
Then I leaned and glanced to my right and I first saw Sergey [Shubentsov] and I thought, "Oh man, he won." Then I looked at the scoreboard and his name came up first, and then [Hansle Parchment] came up next. I thought, "Oh no! I didn't even medal!" But then my name came up in 3<sup>rd</sup>. But I had a lot

of emotions rush through my mind in just a few seconds.

**T&FN:** *Afterwards, you said that in many ways, that Worlds bronze shone more brightly to you than the Olympic gold.*

**Merritt:** I said that because of the struggle;

**Merritt:** I feel fine and ready to go; the doctors just need to clear me for training. But I can lift my knees; I can walk. I could probably jog—but I've been a very good patient and followed my doctor's orders. I just don't want any setbacks. I've got a treadmill and I get on



**Merritt remains the fastest hurdler ever**

all I had to go through to get that bronze medal: the doctors telling me I might never run again; people speculating I was on drugs because I wasn't running as fast as in '12. I couldn't believe they said that because I had been almost living at Mayo and going through all the tests and repeat treatments.

Asking if I was on drugs was the most hurtful thing anyone could say. You work so hard as an athlete and then for someone to say I tried to cheat, that was so spiteful. I have never failed a drug test and I never will because I don't do anything that I'm not supposed to. It was absurd and hurtful. That was another reason I needed to come forward and let people know what was going on.

**T&FN:** *So you're feeling good now and looking forward to getting back to training?*

told me that I needed a transplant because my kidney function was failing rapidly. They said, 'You have until March of '16 before your kidneys stop working altogether.' I asked, 'Can't we push that date back—like a year?' They just said, 'Uh, no.' If I hadn't had the transplant when I did, then next March I would have had to go on dialysis.

"A big reason I wanted to speak out was to encourage other people who also have the disorder to have hope. I've seen it; some people just give up because they don't want to live with dialysis.

"So I wanted to motivate them to not give up. I wanted them to realize that you can do anything if you just stay calm, keep a level head and stay positive about everything. That's another reason I decided to come forward with my story."

it occasionally and walk for a few minutes. You really do have to learn to walk before you can run. [laughs]

**T&FN:** *What have been the overriding lessons for you in the last couple of years?*

**Merritt:** First, you have to be mentally strong. If you are, you can pretty much overcome anything. The brain is special. The body is strong and can withstand pretty much anything. But if your mind is weak, then your body can't do anything. It's pretty much given up.

You have to realize that your mind definitely is stronger than your body. Even if you're physically unable to do something, if you will yourself to do it, then you can do it. That's what I did: I willed myself to run the Worlds, even though they recommended against it.

But I needed to run. I needed to not feel like I wasn't normal.

**T&FN:** *Is defending at the Games the biggest aim? So take your time and be ready for that?*

**Merritt:** Yes, although it will all depend on how well I can come back. I really will take it one day at a time. I really want to run indoors. We haven't had the World Indoors in the U.S. since '87—I wasn't even two years old then!

So if I can pull it together for indoors, you'll see me run there. I really would love to compete in front of the home crowd in a Worlds setting. But if indoors doesn't work out, then you'll see me outdoors for sure. □

## Keeping It Hush-Hush

*Aries Merritt made a conscious decision to not reveal his problems until shortly before the WC:*

"I don't like making excuses, so it was very difficult not to say anything. I just lined up knowing that the other guys were ready and thought I would be too, whether I was or not. So when you get on that starting line, you're vulnerable, exposed.

"Of course, I knew there was something going on with me, but I just didn't feel like disclosing that information. I thought I could just deal with it; I would recover and wouldn't have to worry about it.

"But after Prefontaine this year, the doctors