

T&FN INTERVIEW

LaShawn Merritt

by Jon Hendershott

LaShawn Merritt has worked his way up the scale of championships in the 400: '04 World Junior titlist, '05 Worlds 4x4 heat runner, '07 Worlds 400 silver and relay gold, then the Olympic titles in both events last year.

Now he is the quartermiler with the target on his back. But it's a challenge the 22-year-old Virginia native welcomes because he has to give his best:

T&FN: You wrote in your IAAF Online Diary that you felt the only thing that really had changed from '08 has been the intensity of your workouts. Are they physically more demanding, mentally, or both?

Merritt: Pretty much both. Getting more speedwork, more flexibility, more abs work to get my core stronger. And mentally, just gaining confidence. Running meets, looking at film and checking execution. Confidence comes with execution. When you have executed and you can see and feel that you're doing things right, then you gain confidence.

Merritt In A Nutshell

•**Personal:** Born June 27, 1986, in Portsmouth, Virginia; 6-2/181 (1.88/82)

•**Schools:** Wilson HS (Portsmouth) '04; attended East Carolina '05; currently attends Old Dominion University; represents Nike

•**PRs:** 100—10.47 ('04), 200—19.98 ('07), 300—31.31 ('06) (2, 2 W, A), 400—43.75 ('08) (5, x W, A)

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

•**Major Meets:** 200—1)USJ '05, 400—1)USJ, 1)WJ '04; 4)US '05; 2)US, 1)WCup '06; 2)US, 2)WC '07; 1)OT, 1)OG '08, 4x1—1)WJ '04 (38.66 WJR), 4x4—1)WJ '04 (3:01.09 WJR); 1)WC '05 (heats); 1)WCI, '06; 1)WC '07; 1)OG '08.

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

situation and knowing how to race gave me confidence.

Some people wanted me to come into the sport and make a major impact right away. But I feel progress is a slow process. I wouldn't have wanted to come right in and beat everybody. I was only 18 years old. I have to learn the race and I am. It's a race with a fine line—a big dif-

ference between 21.2 and 21.5 [for the opening 200]. So it takes a long time to practice and figure those things out.

T&FN: Winning the Olympics is the major goal for most athletes. But has there been any particular mental adjustment you have had to make after winning?

Merritt: Pretty much just staying hungry. Putting those medals away but still knowing that I've got goals I still want to accomplish. It's all about forward movement. I know what I did last year, but I've got more goals I want to achieve. I want to still keep the confidence from last year, but not lose the work ethic or lose focus.

Sometimes people get to a point where they accomplish what they want and then they feel like, "OK, I'm here now so I don't have to work hard. I did what I wanted to do and now I don't have to work hard anymore." But now the real work actually starts.

I know my competitors are training hard, too, because they want to be where I am. The only way to keep them from getting there is to go out every day and do my job to the best of my ability.

T&FN: Up to actually competing in Beijing, did you have any feelings about the meaning of "Olympic champion"?

Merritt: Well, I started thinking about the Olympics when I won World Juniors. I felt that if I could be a world champion on the Junior level, then it was realistic to think that one day I could become one on the elite level. Once I made the decision to make running my job, then that became the goal. That was one of my goals and what I worked toward ever since I turned pro. But I still have more.

T&FN: When did you first truly believe you could become Olympic champion?

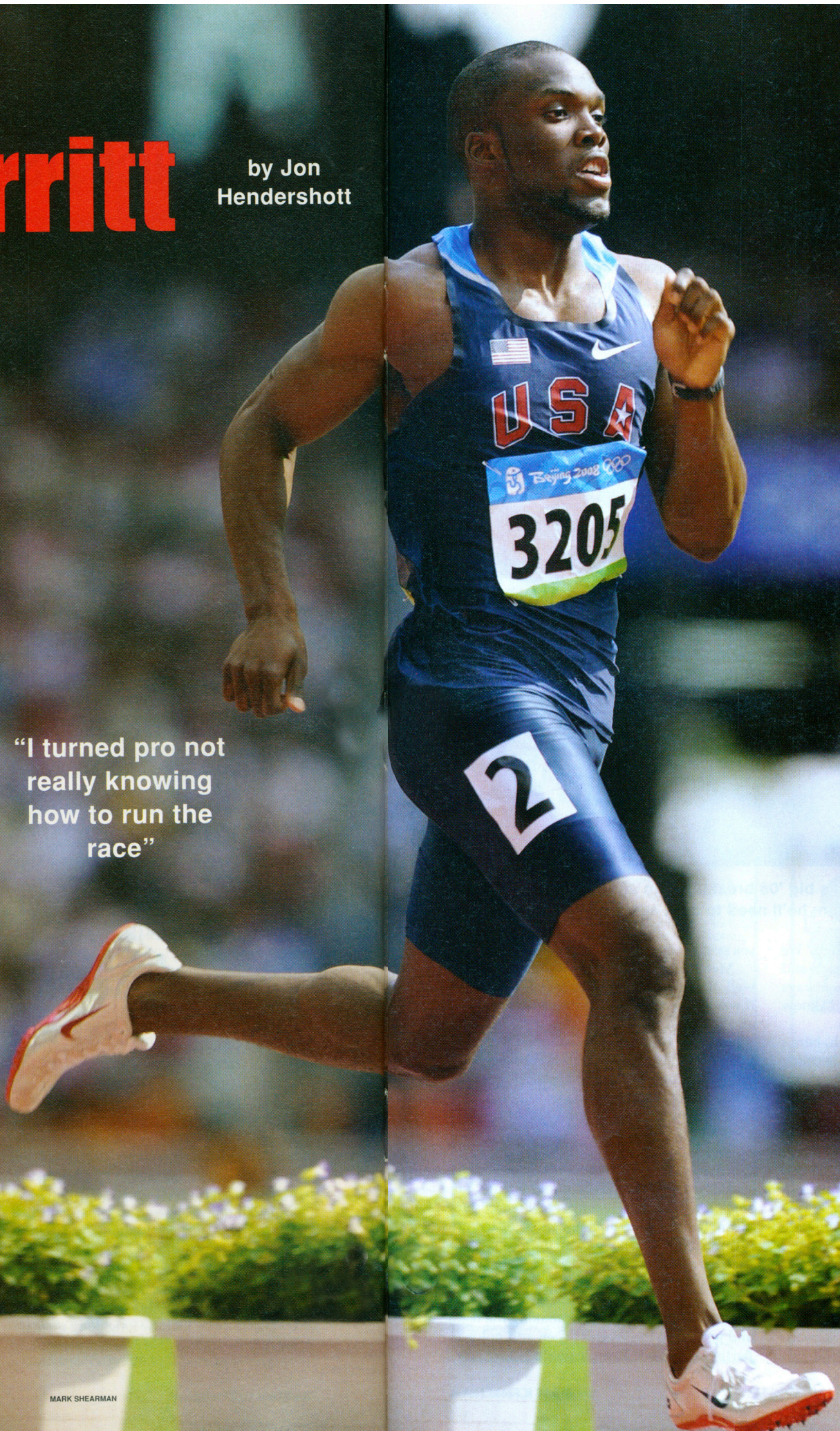
Merritt: Actually, it was at the Worlds in '07. I got 2nd so I was the No. 2 guy in the world. But I also knew I hadn't learned all I needed to learn about running the 400. I knew there was a lot more to learn and I had another year to put it all together. I thought, "I'm No. 2 in the world, there's only one guy in the world who has actually beaten me, so it's time to go to work now."

T&FN: You started the LaShawn Merritt Foundation last year and then hosted your own high school indoor meet at the end of January. Are those ways to give back in the sport and help young kids coming up?

Merritt: It was giving back, but also

"I turned pro not really knowing how to run the race"

MARK SHEARMAN



to let them know that dreams can come true. They will say, "I want to do this someday."

They can see that I did it and they can do it. I talk to kids a lot; not so much formal speeches, but talking more informally. My main things are letting them know to give 110% and believe in what they want. Whatever you want to do, give it your all and you should get it done. But if you don't, you still will have worked hard. Whenever I lose a race, I don't get down. I'm going to go back and train harder.

T&FN: So you don't mind being put up as an example of how to train and compete?

Merritt: Not really. At the end of the day, I know it takes hard work. I know people might say, "LaShawn did this, or that." But when I talk to kids, I'll let them know that in spite of what I did, you have to set your own path.

You have to set your own goals and work towards them. Keep the negativity out of your life. You'll always have people around you saying, "Aw, you should do this or that." I feel that if it's something that deep down in your heart that you want to achieve, go after it. It can be sports or whatever it is.

T&FN: When did you begin running?

Merritt: I ran a couple of 100s and 200s my freshman and sophomore years in high school; nothing major. Then I started running the 400 in my junior year. But before that, I was just running for my school in small meets around the area. Four or five meets a year. I ran about 11-something in the 100.

T&FN: There is the factor of the untimely death of your older brother Antwan [who died in a fall from a college dorm balcony late in '99]. Was that, in fact, the reason you got into running?

Merritt: Not really. When I was younger, like in middle school, my baseball coach—who was also my football coach at the time—took me to a track meet at Norfolk State. It was real one-on-one competition; looking at a person and getting

in his head. I didn't even know about track before then. We didn't have track in middle school or even much in clubs. You waited until high school to run.

T&FN: You have been quoted that your brother "is there with me" when you race. But what was his effect on you?

Merritt: He was an older brother who was a motivator. He would play baseball with me,

Sizing Up The Competition

LaShawn Merritt has had a tremendous career rival in '04 Olympic champ Jeremy Wariner. Facing the Texan in the 400, says Merritt, "just keeps me hungry because I know he's working hard too. When I line up in any race, even if I don't know some of the runners, I know those guys are going to bring their A game.

"So I never doubt anybody because I know he's working hard. And so are Angelo Taylor, Chris Brown, Gary Kikaya. There are a lot of great quartermilers who are working very hard. I just have to work harder. So when we line up, may the best man win that day. And the best man might be different in every race, which makes it exciting."

Beijing superstar Usain Bolt has talked of perhaps trying the 400 in '10. On facing the Jamaican, Merritt says, "Anybody can be a competitor. If a high school kid wanted to jump into a race, he becomes a competitor. I never doubt anybody because you don't know what's going to happen in a given race.

"Bolt has run the 400 before [45.28]. If he steps up to the 400 again, he's just going to be somebody who, when he lines up, I'm going to try to beat."

Could a runner with Bolt's ability become an "instant" threat in the 400? Or is there a learning curve a quartermiler has to go through before reaching the elite level?

"Well, anything is possible," says Merritt. "But I definitely feel that the 400 is a race that takes time to really learn how to run it. Mainly because you get to a definite lactic stage; you don't hurt in the 100 or 200 like you do in the 400. You have to know how to fight through that pain and know how to set up your race."

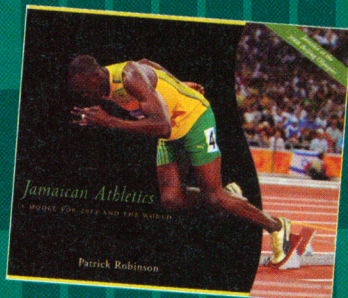
or in football say, "I'll give you \$5 if you make a touchdown." But the sport I chose, he never got to see me do. I got into track after '99, but I really didn't get serious about it until about '03. So he never got to see me run, but it's been like, "We go and do it together." Even today his memory spurs me on.

T&FN: Were you always a sprinter?

Merritt: Yes, because in baseball or football, I was always one of, or the, fastest guys. My junior year, my coach told me I had the frame to run the 400. I took it on as a challenge and ended up winning State that year.

Then in the summer between my junior and senior years, I got with Dwayne Miller and we worked out a lot during the summer. The next winter was my first indoor season. I ran

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Merritt — continued

everything and actually won the 55, 300 and 500 at the State meet as a senior. Then I won the 200 and 400 at the Nike Indoor. And then I went on and had a great outdoor season.

The thing about me was that I was a sprinter, but I was tall. So it didn't take time for me to generate speed. The 400 was the ideal race for me, pretty much.

T&FN: Was there a time when you really "became" a 400 runner, when you felt like it was your event? Or did it just sort of grow on you?

Merritt: I pretty much felt like it was my race when I ran at high school outdoor nationals in '04. You had Elzie Coleman, who was running crazy times up in New York. Cedric Goodman was in the field from Georgia and had been running pretty fast.

Then there was me. It was like, "Who is this guy?" And I ended up running 45.3.

I was like, "Man! I ran pretty fast and it didn't really hurt." Then I went to Junior nationals and won and then went to World Juniors and won that.

So I figured, "I've only been running this race for two years, but I'm the fastest Junior in the world. So this is pretty much what I should be doing."

T&FN: Has Dwayne Miller affected your career by not only teaching you how to run the 400, but also in building your confidence?

Merritt: He's a real technical coach and real down to earth. He knows when I'm hurting and he'll say, 'That's enough.' We watch a lot of film together. He's coach and tells me what I'm doing wrong—I've always believed that if I run a bad race and don't know what's wrong, then there's a problem.

If I can run a race and say, "Coach, here's what I did wrong," then I'm really learning what's going on. Once you know your mistakes and can explain things to him, I feel you're really learning the race.

T&FN: You then had a great World Juniors in the summer of '04. Then after a very short college career at East Carolina in the winter of '05, you turned pro. What was the basis for that decision after such a short college career?

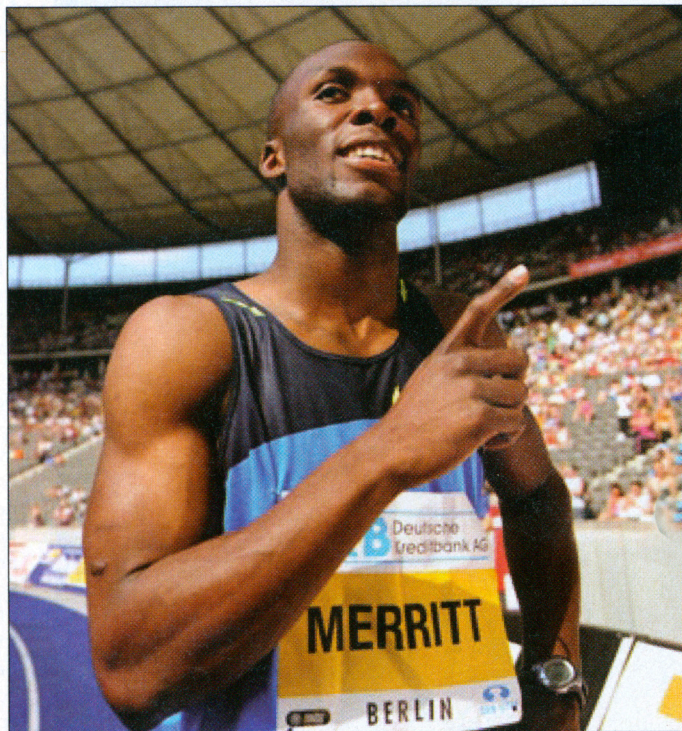
Merritt: I just love to run; I'm a competitor and this is what I love to do. In that race [indoor WJR 44.93], I beat a great field. Nike told me I'd be paid to do what I loved to do and they would pay for me to go to school. So it was a win-win situation. I go to Old Dominion University in Norfolk now, majoring in sports management and minoring in business.

T&FN: You felt that you were ready, in terms of maturity and physical ability, to go from a brief college career to pro running? There was no fear that maybe it was too much, too soon?

Merritt: Once I made the decision, I was OK. Actually that first year was like a reality check for me. People were a lot older and more serious. This was how they fed their families and paid their bills.

Once I got into it, I realized I couldn't live like an 18-year-old because running was now my 9-to-5. So if I wanted to be competitive at that level, even at age 18, I had to mature at an early age. I don't regret it at all.

T&FN: Was the Olympic 400 final the best race



Merritt's big '08 breakthrough against Wariner came in Berlin; he'll need to do it again come August.

you've ever run—so far?

Merritt: Probably. I put it together pretty well. [Laughs] I knew once we got to the 300, it was going to come down to who wanted it and it would be a fight. I had been in situations where I came off the 300 and there were people beside me, or I was ahead of everybody or I was behind people. So I was pretty much ready for whatever position I was going to be in coming off 300. I just knew I had to work hard that last 100.

T&FN: Is the World Record a prime goal for you, or are you taking that in steps?

Merritt: It is a goal of mine, but it's not something that I'm rushing. I feel records are meant to be broken, but let them come to you. I'll probably start talking about the record when I start to consistently run 43.4s, 43.3s. I haven't dropped down to that yet.

For me, my main goals are just staying healthy, having a good year, making the team and getting to the Worlds. Then add golds in Berlin to my two Olympic golds. □