

Aries Merritt

Transplant to Success

Aries Merritt was on top of the world in 2012, with an Olympic gold medal and a world record of 12.80 seconds in the 110-meter hurdles, and he recorded the most sub-13-second races in a single season by any athlete. In 2015, Aries Merritt was on top of an operating table.

His kidneys began to fail in 2013 and he was told he might never run again as a result of collapsing focal segmental glomerulosclerosis, a progressive form of kidney disease. The diagnosis turned Aries into a depressed, angry, and mean person. He battled this illness with kidneys functioning at only 10 percent to win a bronze medal at the 2015 world championships in a season-best time, just a week before undergoing his kidney transplant thanks in part to his sister, who served as his kidney donor.

Doctors told Aries he had to wait eight weeks to return to training. He was able to get going in seven, then needed to wait several more weeks when his new kidney needed a second surgery in October. After a single day of training, he had developed a hematoma. Aries didn't lift weights for two months after surgery. He takes medication for his kidney every 12 hours, but the drugs are either neutral or could slightly weaken muscles.

Though maybe not as strong, Aries felt as though he was in better shape than ever going into the 2016 Olympic Trials. Approximately 10 months post-surgery, he had also been recovering from a torn groin in recent weeks. Aries launched from the starting blocks in the 110-meter hurdles final, his trail leg grazing the transplant scar across his abdomen 10 times as he cleared each hurdle. An agonizing wait for the time to show up on the scoreboard showed that Aries missed the 2016 Olympic team by the cruelest of margins: one one-hundredth of one second. Aries thought he finished second or third and asked for the photo finish to be review, but the result stood.

Despite barely missing his second Olympic team, Aries Merritt still holds the world record in the 110-meter hurdles. But more importantly, he has set the standard for courageous effort.

Questions For Thought:

1. With his kidneys only operating at 10%, Aries won a silver medal in the 2015 World Championships. What is your reaction to this performance?
2. Aries couldn't wait to resume training. How anxious are you to improve your game?
3. What does courage mean to you?