

The Importance of Being Earvin

On Sexuality, Gays, George Bush, and AIDS

He was the athlete of the '80s, and it was the disease of the decade. After more than 10 years of dominating the headlines on the news and sports pages of America, Earvin "Magic" Johnson and the country's awareness of AIDS fused in the national consciousness last Nov. 7.

On that day, Johnson walked into the Great Western Forum in Inglewood, Calif., the site of so many of his greatest triumphs in basketball, and announced that he was immediately retiring from the National Basketball Association (NBA) because he was infected with HIV, the suspected AIDS virus. Suddenly it seemed that sports had lost one of its greatest and most loved stars. Just as suddenly, AIDS activists had in their midst one of the greatest fund raisers on the planet – a bona fide superstar capable of generating unprecedented publicity whose celebrity status in the psyche of mainstream America would compel the most reluctant of politicians to sit up and take notice. With a smile and disarming manner that charm presidents and preschoolers alike, Johnson had a health condition that brought with it the potential to revitalize the course of the entire AIDS awareness movement.

To understand the phenomenon of Johnson, one must understand the unique niche he carved for himself in the sport of basketball. Seldom has anyone in any team sport achieved so much success at such an early age and sustained it at such a high level. Born Aug. 14, 1959, in Lansing, Mich., he was drilled in the fundamentals of the game by his father. He was such a dominating player by his sophomore year in high school that a local sportswriter cast about for an apt description of this indescribable player and settled on the nickname "Magic." Grabbing rebounds and steals at a record rate, passing to teammates or scoring himself, Johnson led his school to a state title his senior year and then, just two years later, powered his hometown school, Michigan State University, to the 1979 national championship over Indiana State University in Terra Haute – despite its lanky star and future Johnson rival, Larry Bird.

Taken by the Los Angeles Lakers in the first round of that year's NBA draft, Johnson was an instant success. His understanding of the game was unsurpassed, and at 6 foot 9 he not only towered over his colleagues at point guard but was tall enough to play any position. In the fifth game of the 1980 NBA championship series against the Philadelphia 76ers, the rookie started at center in place of injured Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and proceeded to play all five positions, all the while leading the Lakers to victory with 42 points, 15 rebounds seven assists, and three steals.

His talents did not go unrewarded. Last year Johnson's worth was estimated at \$50 million. His endorsement contracts with companies such as Nintendo, Nestlé, Pepsi, Converse, Spalding, Kentucky Fried Chicken and Target stores, totaling in the neighborhood of \$12 million annually, dwarfed his Lakers salary of \$2.5 million. He was also having one hell of a good time away from the basketball court. Johnson was married last September to Cookie Kelly (she's now pregnant), but up to that point he led what he euphemistically describes as "a bachelor's existence." Johnson has said, "I was never at a loss for female companionship. I did my best to accommodate as many women as I could – most of them through unprotected sex."

Then came Johnson's chilling announcement, one that certainly hit home to his "bachelor" colleagues throughout the world of pro sports. Two waves of mainstream media reaction were touched off, both distinct, both predictable. The first wave: grief and salutations, unadulterated lauding of a great player's career and his courage in going public with such calm force. The second wave: media reactions that were moralistic and smacked of HIV and AIDS discrimination. Basketball reporter Gary Binford of New York's Daily News wrote, "Considering that new revelations are still being made about the AIDS virus, it seems doctors still don't know enough about this deadly disease to state unequivocally that other players are not at risk competing against someone who has the virus. 'I'm not comfortable dealing with somebody or playing with somebody or sitting next to somebody that has this thing,' an NBA general manager said."

When Johnson affirmed his continuing desire to play in this year's Summer Olympics and left open the door for a possible return to the NBA, many in basketball and the press flipped out. One Australian doctor said he'd urge a boycott of the U.S. team if Johnson played in the upcoming Olympic Games. The International Basketball Federation and the International Olympic Federation both stood by Johnson's right to play. And after medical experts from all over the world said the risk of exposure posed by an athlete with HIV was infinitesimal. The Australian Olympic Committee apologized for the remark.

Although lacking expertise on the disease and the communities that it has devastated (Johnson said when he first heard he had the virus, he thought it automatically meant he had AIDS), Johnson has certainly brought greater exposure to the fight against AIDS. However, Johnson has not – until very recently – been involved with the gay community. He has not, for example, met with activist-author Larry Kramer, though Kramer says he’s written Johnson and tried to set up a face-to-face dialogue through the intercession of hockey star Wayne Gretzky, a good friend of Johnson’s. Johnson said he’s been told Kramer has attempted to portray him as a closeted homosexual. “I never said he was gay,” says Kramer. “I was on Nightline [the night of Johnson’s press conference], and I said this was one case where I hoped someone wasn’t gay because he’s more valuable as a spokesperson that way.”

Johnson says now is the time to talk, “to break down the walls” between him and the gay community. “Let’s get together, sit down, talk,” says Johnson. “Then they’ll know what I’m all about, and I’ll understand what they’re all about. I now understand their anger, believe me. All I have is the same drugs they have. I’m now in the fight for everybody – not just for blacks or Hispanics, not just for heterosexuals. We’re not going to win this war thinking that way. The world has got to understand that’s just not going to work.”

Why are you doing this interview?

I want to start a dialogue with the gay and lesbian community. I think that a lot of people in the gay community really don’t know me. It’s been said that I haven’t talked to them, that I don’t understand. That’s not true. There’s been a lot of Magic bashing. At this point, I talk to more gay people than heterosexual people because they’ve been going through this for years and they’ve been taking care of their own. You have to give the gay and lesbian community a lot of credit for that. The rest of us have to learn from that.

Does your HIV status give you a common bond with the gay community?

The bond is there, but the real bond is with the guys who are infected. I’m in the trenches with them and fighting for them. I’ve met so many of them now, with my cross-country travels. I’m bonded with all of them now because society treats us like outcasts for the most part.

It wasn’t until after your initial press conference that you specified that you’d been infected through heterosexual contact and categorically denied that you’d ever had a homosexual experience. Why did you reveal that?

I wanted everybody to know that it wasn’t just a gay disease.

On Arsenio Hall, you said you’d never had a homosexual contact, and the audience applauded. How should a gay person interpret that applause?

The things that go on in terms of the gay bashings and things like that, even I can’t stop that. Stupid people are still going to be stupid people in terms of how they feel regardless of what I do.

You could speak out against it.

I tell people when I go out to speak that no matter how people got this virus, we’ve got to open up our arms to everybody – not just to me because I’m heterosexual. Until you’re able to educate society – not just about AIDS and HIV but about gays and stuff – they’re always going to say and do stupid things.

How do you think the crowd would have reacted if you said you were gay?

I don’t know.

Do you think you would have gotten the same applause?

I’m sure not.

If you were gay or bisexual, would you admit it?

Why would I hide it? I’ve always been a straight shooter with everybody. And if I were gay, it would have to come out. That’s just something you’re not going to be able to hide from the media. Everybody would have known way before my announcement.

How do you think a gay player would be received in the NBA by the other players?

It would be tough, I’m sure, because they’ve always got to shower [together] and that whole thing. They wouldn’t know if the guy’s coming on to them or not. I think they’d be apprehensive in terms of that side – the sexual side – of him. Maybe I’m wrong. These are the ‘90s.

There were occasional rumors throughout your career about your being gay. Those rumors accelerated in 1988 when you kissed Isiah Thomas during the NBA playoffs. Why do you think those rumors started?

Just because of that. It's funny, because I hugged and kissed my dad to show affection. It's the same with me and Isaiah.

How did you feel about the rumors?

If I worried about every rumor or everything that's been said about me, I'd be a crazy person.

Have you ever had a homosexual experience?

No. Never.

You've talked about being one of the most sexually active players in the league. How many sexual partners did you have, and how wild were you?

I couldn't count them.

How do you respond to what Martina Navratilova said after the announcement of your HIV status – that a woman athlete who admitted having as many sexual encounters as you did would've been branded a slut rather than receiving support?

She was probably right. It's too bad our society is like that. I wasn't upset with her. She was making a point and she was speaking up for women.

How do you react to criticisms by right-wing fundamentalists and politicians of your admittedly promiscuous lifestyle?

Am I supposed to retract everything I've done in the past? Nobody can do that. Morally what I did may have been wrong. But like I said, there's nothing I can do about it now. You try to learn from what happened and go on.

The transmission of AIDS through unsafe sex had been publicized heavily for years, yet you continued to have unsafe sex. Hadn't you heard the warnings, or did you think that heterosexuals were safe?

I heard the warnings, but I never thought it would happen to me.

Had you ever talked to a doctor about AIDS?

No. The NBA had a group of people who came in and spoke to each team once a year. They talked about AIDS but more about drugs.

What did they tell you?

That unprotected sex could lead to AIDS. I was listening, but at the same time I wasn't. They were telling us we should protect ourselves, especially because of all the women that were around.

What did the phrase "safe sex" mean to you then?

Use a condom. But I'd been having sex without them for so long. I tried them, though.

Why didn't you stay with them?

I didn't get the same feeling.

How long did you try them?

Just one time.

Do you see yourself as an example of why education is necessary??

If I'm an example, that's fine. I just hope people listen.

How stunned were you when you got the news?

Stunned. Very stunned. Disappointed. Upset. Frustrated.

Publicly you've maintained a very upbeat persona. How have you handled the private times when you do get upset?

I'm just trying to deal with it. I try to eat healthy, continue to work out, try to do the things I have to do to take care of myself. I don't run from it, I meet it head-on. If I give up, if I get depressed, then it's over for me. And then it's over for a lot of other people, too. I think we educated a lot of people when I played in the All-Star Game, that people can carry on, that they can live. They don't have to – just because they have the virus – think that it's over.

What kind of sexual or emotional strain has this put on your marriage?

It's put a strain on it emotionally because of the uncertainty. Sexually, you just have protected sex, that's all.

The two largest changes in what you've been doing now have been in sports and in sex. What do you miss in both of those?

In sports I miss the team competition. I miss the competitive nature of the big games. Like being in New York and playing the Knicks. Being in Boston or playing against [Chicago Bull] Michael [Jordan]. Sexually, I miss only one thing: the semen part of it. My wife and I, we can do everything else but that. No oral sex, that's all.

What kind of work are you doing now as far as AIDS awareness and AIDS activism go?

I'm on the President's [National] Commission [on AIDS], which covers everything from housing and care to prevention. Then there's my foundation. We're trying to raise a lot of money for research. I'm speaking everywhere, too. When I'm not speaking, I'm listening, trying to educate myself. Everybody has something different on their agenda. Some people talk about care. Some people talk about housing. Some talk about prevention, research. The list goes on.

What have people been telling you when you go out, when you visit hospices?

Everybody wants and needs housing. When you have HIV and you're homeless, you're staring death in the face. I spoke to a woman at [the Department of Housing and Urban Development], and I was on her. She was trying to babble around like most politicians, take this roundabout route and try to explain all this stuff with numbers. They allot money to cities that are building hospices or that are maintaining homes for people with AIDS. She named a lot of cities, but none were predominantly black cities that have huge homeless populations. "How can you give so much money to Charlotte, N.C., to Portland, Ore." I asked. "What happened to Detroit, Chicago, L.A., New York?" It just didn't make sense to me. That really flustered her because that had never been really brought up to her.

Last January you criticized George Bush for not doing enough in the fight against AIDS. Will you step up your criticism if things don't change?

Of course. I recently told him I will step down if things don't change.

What needs to change?

I want him to stop dancing around the truth. I believe the only thing any of us have is our word. That's all I have, that's all he has. If he's not going to do anything, I want him to just tell me, straight out, "We can't increase the budget," instead of running me around.

Would you ever be a demonstrator? Would you ever join gays and lesbians in the streets?

I don't know. I might. I'm not a violent person. So as long as it wasn't that kind of a situation, maybe.

After your announcement, the insurance industry argued that you were an example of why insurers should be allowed to demand mandatory testing. You're wealthy enough to take a hit like that. What about working stiffs who might be denied health insurance or benefits on the job because of mandatory testing?

Everybody deserves health insurance. Give them their benefits just like you give everybody else. I think this situation is ridiculous.

George Bush doesn't think so.

I do.

You retired because the doctors warned you that the strain of playing pro basketball could adversely affect your immune system. In light of that, why do you want to play in the Olympics and why are you considering coming back to the NBA?

I had to educate ballplayers because of all the fear that was going on. Also, I did it for myself. I just wanted to get out there and play. I'm doing great, I'm feeling great. With the 82-game season, you're playing four different cities in five nights. That's where the stress comes in, trying to play to full 82-game schedule. But the doctors have said with a modified schedule, maybe I could play. I'll think about it and see what happens after the Olympics and then make a decision.

Some have said you should never play basketball again because of the potential risk to other players in the event of a bloody collision. No one has contracted the virus through basketball yet. Did you talk to doctors first and get their reassurance?

I talked to a lot of them. I don't make rash decisions. If I felt they were going to be in jeopardy or that I was going to harm them in any way, I would've never played.

Should HIV-positive athletes have the right to play contact sports?

If you're asking about basketball, yes.

What about other sports?

I don't know. As long as nobody's been harmed, they should be allowed. I don't think they should be prevented just because they have the virus.

Since you tested positive, what kind of contact have you had with your previous sexual partners?

I've tried to call them and tell them what is happening or what has happened and to go out and get tested. It's a twofold situation: I want to know how I got it, too.

Why do you want to know how you got infected?

Not how, but who.

Why do you want to know that?

I just want to know. I think if anybody got infected, they'd want to know. Show me one person that wouldn't want to know. I don't think you'll find too many that would just say, "I don't want to know who it was."

You said the last six months have changed you. How?

I'm less naive. I feel like when those doctors were talking to us in the locker room about AIDS that I should have been tuned in to it. I should never have thought – *nor should anyone think* – That can't happen to me. I'm living proof. ▼

***– Roger Bringham, Advocate Magazine, April 21, 1992;
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