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"Magic" Johnson and HIV

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
November 13, 1991

Just over a week ago rumors swept through the media that Ervin "Magic" Johnson was about to retire from professional basketball because he had AIDS. A few hours later Johnson appeared at a press conference to confirm the rumor of his retirement. He said he did not have AIDS, but rather he had tested positive for the HIV virus, a precursor to AIDS. It is a virtual certainty that Johnson will contract AIDS within the next decade. Because he had tested HIV positive, it was determined that medically it would be wise for him to retire from basketball.

Among those present at the press conference were David Stern the Commissioner of the NBA, Jerry Buss the owner of the Los Angeles Lakers, Jerry West the General Manager of the Lakers, two doctors, and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar former Laker great and teammate of Johnson.

CNN and ESPN carried the press conference live, the story was featured on all the news programs both local and network for the next two days; NBC did a twenty minute special at 11:30 p.m. that night delaying the start of the Carson show; and Ted Koppel's Nightline was devoted to the story. The following morning it was front-page headlines in The Orlando Sentinel.

It was clearly the biggest story of the day, the week, and maybe the past six months. I must say that I was overwhelmed by the sheer volume of coverage. Why all this fuss over a basketball player?

The answer to that question will tell us something about ourselves and our society, and especially about numerous changes that have taken place in our society over the past three decades.

One of my friends suggested that the treatment afforded this story is a measure of how much the news media has changed. At one time this story would have been confined to the sports pages, and the medical aspect of the story would have been treated only circumspectly. But news distributors are much more attuned to the concept of celebrity these days and soft news has clearly come to dominate most electronic news outlets, and this has affected the content of newspapers.

It also reflects the power of sports celebrity. Sport is clearly a major factor in the culture, and personalities from the world

of sport have come to carry great significance in the lives of ordinary people. The term "role model," was worn out over the past week. Wherever you went over the days the followed, all sorts of people were talking about Magic Johnson.

Whenever the young prince is struck down it draws much attention. Here was a young man who had established himself as one of the best in his field, who had become a public figure of considerable stature, who was perceived to be a wonderful warm human being, suddenly announcing to the public that he must retire for medical reasons. Through it all the warmth remained, the Magic smile was still there, the charm was on full blast, as he announced that he was under a death sentence. And all the money, all the success, all the celebrity in the world could not save him from what has become a major epidemic across the world.

Magic Johnson says that he hopes his ordeal will teach some important lessons about AIDS and about the need for safe sex. Perhaps it will. Apparently the Orlando Magic players already felt the chilling effects while in New York the night of the announcement. Barry Cooper, reporting in The Orlando Sentinel, found that the conversation among the single players on the bus to the airport the next morning had changed. There was no discussion of who had "gotten lucky" the night before with the young women who are waiting to service professional athletes across the country. Instead they were talking about Johnson, the need for safe sex, the realization that casual and recreational sex is no longer a safe game after the game.

It is difficult to know how deep these changes will be. One guesses that in the short run fear will outrun pleasure, but over the long haul probably not. Unless. What would be the impact if over the next several years Magic Johnson, not only speaks out about the need for safe sex and the need for more research money for AIDS, but if he contracts AIDS and the nation watches as this lively, charming, super-star athlete is physically ravaged and dies before our eyes? Unfortunately this is a scenario we may see.

Finally, it has been interesting to hear AIDS and sex discussed with such frankness in the public forum. This clearly would not have been the case three decades ago, and it is one of the positive results of the sexual revolution. It has been equally interesting that almost no comment has been made on the moral or ethical issues of the sexual promiscuity which led Magic Johnson down this road. The only real concern has been whether or not Magic is gay, and there seems to have been a sigh of relief with

his reassurances that he is not. The acceptance of sexual promiscuity, the matter of fact manner with which it is discussed, is another thing that would not have been part of the reaction three decades ago, and this may be a less positive development.

One of the greatest players of all-time, and clearly a man who helped transform the NBA from a dying sporting event, to a profitable public spectacle, has retired. By itself that news was big enough. It is a shame there was more. The Magic truly is gone.

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