

Opinion: Learning from Magic Johnson 20 years after HIV announcement

Publisher's note: Dec. 1 is World AIDS Day.

By Chris Ballard, Sports Illustrated

For those of us who came of age in the late 1980s and early '90s, it was the closest thing sports had to a JFK moment. We can remember exactly where we were and what we were doing on the afternoon of Nov. 7, 1991. Some of us learned the news secondhand, in a dorm or classroom. Others watched live as Magic Johnson, the five-time NBA champion and the embodiment of class and charisma on a basketball court, stepped to a podium in a black suit, stared down the flashbulbs and said those words: Because of the HIV virus that I have attained ... I will have to retire from the Lakers.

In a moment our world shifted. Superstar athletes were supposed to be indestructible, especially one as transcendent—and wholesome—as Magic. I knew people who cried, as though they'd lost a family member. One friend swore off sex. Another scheduled an HIV test. After all, if Magic could get HIV, anyone could. We could.

And yet, somehow, Magic didn't seem scared. Here he was, essentially handed a death sentence — at the time, HIV was believed to lead to AIDS in nearly 100 percent of cases—and yet he smiled and said, "I plan on going on living for a long time." He neither made excuses nor ran from his diagnosis. Instead, to his everlasting credit, Magic owned the moment, as he'd owned so many over the years. By doing so he elevated the discussion above mere sports or sex or race. Imagine how different it would have been had it been a less prominent or more polarizing athlete up there. How would we have reacted?

How might the conversation have tilted?

Because it was Magic, though, we tried to understand, to empathize. It wasn't easy. When Johnson, despite being retired, was voted by fans to the '92 NBA All-Star Game, other players, including his former Lakers teammates Byron Scott and A.C. Green, said he shouldn't take part. After Magic was named to the Dream Team, the Australian national squad considered boycotting the 1992 Olympics.

It took all of 34 days for Magic to shelve his NBA comeback in the fall of '92, stung by the backlash over the prospect of his playing, including comments by Karl Malone expressing fear that Magic could transmit the virus through physical play. It took another four years for him to try again. When he did return to the Lakers in '96, beefier yet still effective, it was a powerful moment for sports but an even more powerful one for the HIV community. Here was an HIV-positive public figure who wasn't hiding, who hadn't wasted away but was instead competing against the best athletes in the world. Nearly five years after his diagnosis, Magic wasn't merely living with the virus; he was thriving. "It said to our community that you can continue to live your life and do the things you want to do," says Tom Donohue, founding director of Who's Positive, an HIV/AIDS awareness organization. "He's been a huge role model for so many of us who are positive."

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