Do You Believe in Magic?

Magic Johnson doesn't want to talk about AIDS. Yet he has changed forever the way America sees people with HIV.

June 1, 1996 By Bruce Shoenfeld

I'm sitting in an auxiliary press box at Sacramento's ARCO Arena, watching Earvin "Magic" Johnson play in his 12th National Basketball Association game since 1991. There's a glow of nostalgia in the stands around me—and a little awe, and a little fear—as Johnson catches an outlet pass and turns upcourt. This is his Indian Summer, an unexpected warmth after a premature frost, and nobody is deluded enough to think that it can't end at any time.

Bent deep at the waist, almost hunched, Johnson gallops past midcourt with his dribble. He looks to the left corner, where a teammate is headed, but instead of passing the ball he high-steps around a defender and slices into the foul lane. It's the wrong choice. He runs into congestion and falters, almost stumbles, toward the basket, then flips a shot into the air that falls harmlessly to the ground without reaching the rim. I hear gasps.

Johnson stands still for a moment, takes a breath, then gamely begins his run back downcourt. He's 36 now, old for basketball. He's older than any of his teammates by more than eight years, and the time he spent away from the NBA is longer than the careers of more than half of them. But he's also carrying HIV, and has pushed his body past the limit of the physical strain many doctors consider advisable. Is every show of weakness, every stumble reason for concern?

I'm a sportswriter. My knowledge of AIDS is mostly gleaned from following the stories of Arthur Ashe and Greg Louganis, boxer Lamar "Kid Fire" Parks (as described in the POZ No. 8 cover story), hockey player Bill Goldsworthy and Johnson. When I see him stagger, my mind flashes to the climactic scene in *Bang the Drum Slowly*, in which Robert De Niro, as the baseball player with a brain tumor, drifts aimlessly behind home plate while attempting to catch a pop fly. It's too easy to imagine Johnson in exactly that situation: Overstraining an already taxed immune system, collapsing on the court, hastening his death. Yet that may never happen. America remains largely ignorant about the nuances of the epidemic, but watching Magic Johnson play major-league basketball has given us a deeper understanding about the possibilities of life with AIDS. No other person with HIV has driven home that point so clearly; Johnson does it every working day.

I followed the Lakers on a road trip to Sacramento and Phoenix because I wanted to talk to Johnson myself. I'd long been wondering what had happened to his public support for the fight

against AIDS, support that started with such fanfare on that November day in 1991 when he held the initial press conference that stunned us all. And I wanted some sense of how he was feeling—day to day, mentally and physically—as he extended the limits of the possible.

When I saw him before the game in Sacramento, Johnson told me that he hardly ever thinks about being HIV positive. If so, he's the only one who doesn't. Watching him back on the basketball court becomes no different from watching an aerialist balancing on the high wire or a matador working a bull. For no less than they are, he's playing with his life. Five years ago, his primary-care physician, Dr. Michael Mellman, advised him to forego the sport on its highest level and husband his energy for the big fight. Who was Johnson to contradict him?

Yet he did. So when he spins past Sacramento's Billy Owens and scores with an elegant left-handed lay-up, or sends a perfect cross-court pass to a cutting teammate, or plays 30 minutes, sweating and sprinting and bumping against some of the best athletes in the world -- then sits down with 15 points and seven assists and five rebounds and his purple-and-gold uniform burnished by sweat—it resonates just as deeply as his stumbles do.

That sweat-stained uniform will likely be Johnson's most valuable contribution in the battle against AIDS. It's not quite the role some wanted him to fill, but it's the one he wears brilliantly. When Johnson retired from basketball to talk about condoms and contributions and a cure, AIDS activists rejoiced. He put a human face on the epidemic for those vast millions of Americans who have trouble paying attention to anything outside their direct line of sight. The idea was that he'd use his formidable abilities as a personality to pull AIDS out of the dark corners. At ease in public situations, a forthright and a caring man, Johnson seemed ideally suited to do exactly that kind of moral heavy lifting.

Instead, his activism has faded into the shadows. He has moved from project to project during the past four years, opening a successful movie theater amid much fanfare in South Central Los Angeles and organizing a touring basketball team, adopting a second child with his wife, Cookie, coaching the Lakers for the end of one season, expanding his movie business into other cities and, finally, announcing his return to the NBA last January. According to the allocation of his public time, AIDS has been the forgotten item on his agenda. In a recently published 248-line article in *USA Today* that Johnson wrote, he mentioned AIDS once.

That made me wonder how AIDS activists regarded Johnson, the most famous PWA in the world, so I called Larry Kramer, the legendary AIDS activist. It didn't take long for me to sense Kramer's disdain. "What bothers me about people is when they have power and don't use it," he told me. "We desperately need pressure to be brought on the President and on the system to deal with this plague as the emergency it is. And that's where Magic, who could walk up to the front door of the White House, is a complete failure."

The longer my conversation with Kramer lasted, the angrier he got. He wanted Johnson to brandish his celebrity as a weapon against AIDS, smiting and slashing ignorance and indolence. The fact is, Johnson has been doing plenty—but he's doing it behind a curtain. The night after the Sacramento

game, he accepted a check for $19,023 from the Phoenix Suns on behalf of the Magic Johnson Foundation (MJF), as he does in many of the cities the Lakers visit. According to *Magic Moments*, the foundation's official newsletter, more than $4 million of donations were made in 1995 under MJF auspices to "more than 80 groups of hard-working people who have dedicated themselves to helping people who face AIDS."

Challenged by Kramer to name these groups, I read from the list I'd been given: the AIDS Legal Referral Panel and the NAMES Project Foundation in San Francisco, the AIDS Project of Contra Costa County in Concord, California, the AIDS Service Center in Pasadena, California, the South Bay Free Clinic in Manhattan Beach, California, and Health Initiatives for Youth and Charles Drew University in Los Angeles. The MJF also combined forces with the Robin Hood Foundation to raise more than $500,000 at a charity event in New York, and organized the sale of designer note cards and t-shirts to benefit AIDS research through Levi's Stores nationwide.

But Johnson has not been nearly as generous with his public persona. Keith Cylar, co-executive director of the New York City-based Housing Works, which helps PWAs secure affordable homes, wants Johnson to "take just a day out of his life" to lobby Congress. "I'm not asking him to find a cure. I'm asking him to use his public name to speak for people who can't speak, for the inner-city kids who buy his posters. He has a bully pulpit that he's not really using."

Cylar, who is black and HIV positive, says many activists of color are doubly disappointed in Johnson. "If anything, for a black the stakes are higher. I'm really glad that he can 'forget' he has AIDS. But I hope I'm alive when his T-cells drop and the first lesion shows up, and he realizes that he really does have this virus and it won't go away. I've been to too many of my friends' funerals for too many years, and I know that denial doesn't work."

Johnson does send the occasional pointed letter to political leaders on AIDS issues. He wrote Newt Gingrich condemning the Republican ban on HIV positive service members. And he was very critical and public when he resigned in disgust from President Bush's AIDS Commission (after attending two meetings). Rarely, though, does he mention his condition in speeches or interviews. On this point, Kramer rages. "All these places he's giving money to, that's easy," he says. "He doesn't have to do a fucking thing. He's not using his power to change anything. And why is it all being done so quietly?

"Does it occur to Magic that there are available treatments out there that will save lives, that 99 percent of people of color can't afford? Does it occur to him that the entire continent of Africa has not received AZT because Glaxo Wellcome, the manufacturer, refuses to give it to governments there at a reduced price? Does it occur to him that, by speaking out about this, he could shame Glaxo into doing it?"

Actually, no. "I don't let AIDS dominate my life," Johnson says, and that's an understatement. He has gained weight, changed his diet and, so far, avoided symptoms, so there's no tangible evidence of illness. He's hardly the introspective type, anyway, and life seems good. "To tell you the truth, I don't think he realizes he's HIV positive anymore," says Lester Conner, a former NBA

player who toured internationally with Johnson from 1992 to 1995, playing 140-odd exhibition games.

Since Johnson has returned to the NBA, Conner has, too. He's on the Laker payroll, traveling with the team, working as a liaison between Johnson and various business and charity ventures that come his way. Conner spends more time with Johnson than anyone else does these days, and he says they never discuss AIDS. "I always ask him, 'How do you feel?'" Conner says. "He tells me, 'Don't ask me that! Don't ask me. I don't want sympathy.' I mean, I don't even think he realizes he's HIV positive when he takes his medication. He's feeling so good, it's almost like he's forgotten about it."

Few people with HIV want their friends and associates constantly handwringing over their health. But Johnson "never" discusses his health? While it may be his strategy for dealing with the virus personally, it isn't the way to educate the world.

Whatever its origin, Johnson's reluctance to talk about AIDS means we're missing out on the empirical evidence his grand experiment can deliver. With every byte of information Johnson gives us about his condition, he files a report from the front lines of the AIDS battle. Unfortunately, that information is sparse, and hard to come by.

He can sit in a locker room and talk for an hour about his comeback and not mention AIDS. And the media's level of discomfort with the topic is even higher than his. During a press conference in Denver on the occasion of his first road game after returning to the NBA, reporters peppered him with questions for almost half an hour. They wondered when he might return to the Lakers' starting lineup, how he judged Denver rookie Antonio McDyess, if his wife was happy to see him in uniform again. Not once did they inquire about his health.

When one enterprising radio reporter, Lee Frank, finally asked him how he had changed as a person since that 1991 press conference, Johnson looked nothing more than confused. "Changed?" he said. "I haven't changed at all."

I hope I wasn't the only one who found that odd.

The virus is different in each body—that's what they're finding out now," Johnson says he told the boxer Tommy Morrison, who recently tested positive for HIV. Rejuvenated, Morrison later said he expects to be "cured" within eight months and resume fighting, which shows you what a phone call from Magic Johnson can do. Or not: "What I do, maybe other people can't do," Johnson warns.

For now, however, the world is watching. Sitting in the visitors' locker room in the bowels of ARCO Arena, he looks away when I tell him that AIDS activists such as Kramer harbor a deep disappointment at his lack of visibility. "I know what I'm doing, and because I'm comfortable with that, I don't care what people say," he tells me. "I'm doing more than anyone. There's some people working in the trenches, and I salute them. Others on the medicine side, doing what they do. But what I'm doing has always been needed. Getting it the attention."

Getting attention has always been easy for Johnson. He has no illusions about living a private life -- and he hasn't since eighth grade, when he was already one of the most famous schoolboy athletes in the country and talking to college recruiters. "Celebrities are role models, and whatever they say and do, people are watching," he says. He is as comfortable with his own celebrity as any athlete I've known, so his public reticence on AIDS seems out of character. It begs explanation, but he isn't talking.

Why not? Well, let's say, for argument's sake, that Johnson didn't contract the disease in quite the way he has said he did. It isn't our business how transmission happened, of course—unless he makes it exactly that by telling the world that even a "raging heterosexual" like himself can get infected.

If Johnson's version of events is incomplete -- and I don't have a single bit of evidence that it is—it would explain an honest man's reluctance to repeat again and again the details of his seroconversion.

The fact is, Johnson is uncomfortable saying certain things regarding AIDS and comfortable saying and doing others. He's not planning to run for the U.S. Senate or to start the AIDS Channel. As in the rest of his life, he's doing exactly what he wants to do.

"My focus is to educate and bring awareness to the AIDS issue and to raise money to support HIV/AIDS organizations," he says. "I decided to resign from the AIDS commission because the commission was not—in my eyes—doing what it said it was going to do. It was best for me to resign....Larry Kramer has been very effective as an activist and has done many wonderful things for people with HIV and AIDS. But I decide what my role will be, not anyone else."

And the rest of the world will have to live—or die—with that.

Johnson may say he hasn't changed as a person in the past five years, but physically, at least, he has changed plenty. Prior to his comeback, his exercise regimen included three years of work with bodybuilder Marchell Henry. He'd lift weights, four sets for each exercise, from six to 12 repetitions in each set. He'd lift up to 225 pounds in the bench press, 85 pounds in the dumbbell inclines, cable crosses, dumbbell flies. By the time he rejoined the Lakers, he couldn't fit into his business suits.

Bulked up by 27 pounds, he readied himself for the rigors of an NBA lifestyle. And it is rigorous, even with charter flights and luxury hotels. Following the game in Sacramento, the Lakers boarded a flight for Phoenix. They arrived at the Ritz-Carlton at 1:30 a.m., slept, practiced, ate, then stepped on the bus for the short ride to America West Arena. By five o'clock, Johnson was standing just outside the foul line in his warm-up jersey, shooting jump shots, mentally preparing himself for a match with the mobile—and significantly younger -- Michael Finley. As far as keeping his mind off his condition, it's the perfect therapy.

Dr. Mellman, who still treats Johnson, won't discuss his treatment. Neither will Johnson. We do know that he had previously taken AZT and that he doesn't anymore. I asked him why he stopped,

and which therapies he may currently take. His cryptic response: “The medication that I take is a decision that my doctors and I make.” Published reports say he has journeyed to Kenya for Kemron, aninterferon-based drug (marketed statesside as a treatment by Rev. Louis Farrakhan’s Nation of Islam) that may or may not boost immunity. (One side effect is weight gain, which means those celebrated 27 pounds may not contain as much muscle as advertised.) His T-cell count is above 500, and any health references beyond that seem designed only to show how normal he is. “I’ve gotten two or three colds this winter, but I always keep them at colds,” he told Larry King recently. He stressed that his immune system has shown no signs of deterioration.

But the NBA season is long and difficult. “I have days when I wake up in the morning and feel terrible, and the last thing I want to do is play basketball,” says Joe Kleine, who plays for the Phoenix Suns. “It happens to everyone.” Johnson has made his way through the peaks and valleys 12 times before, but he hasn’t ever been 36, going on 37 -- and he’s never done it while knowing he’s HIV positive.

“You’re gonna get tired,” Johnson admits. “There are times when you get tired and you can’t perform the way you want to. It used to [take] a week and a half, 10 days. You hit a wall. It hasn’t happened yet, but it will.”

When it does, Johnson may well feel the same pull in his stomach as those fans in ARCO Arena who interpreted a simple stumble as something more. Should his body ever weaken under the strain of fighting HIV, the first symptoms would likely be the same as for Joe Kleine’s morning exhaustion: A bodily stubbornness, aches, pains and fatigue. There are finite ways, such as T-cell counts and viral-load tests, to track Johnson’s disease progression, but for someone who has always let his life be guided by a visceral sense of his own well-being, he will find it difficult to know whether fatigue is simply fatigue or something more.

And that’s not just an abstraction: It may affect the course of Johnson’s activism. He wants to play for the Lakers again next year. In the *USA Today* article, he talks about playing four or five more. “I’m like a young man now,” he says. But if he starts to feel symptoms, it may well propel him to take the more activist role so many demand of him. After all, it’ll be his life he’s saving, too.

Until then, in spite of his reticence, he’s still doing more consciousness-raising by spinning past Billy Owens than he would be sunning off the coast of France on his yacht, as he did last summer. He may be a disappointment to activists such as Kramer and Cylar, but he remains the best ambassador PWAs have to the HIV negative world—and an inspiration to anyone who feels constrained by the possible. In some ways, a driving lay-up speaks with an eloquence no press conference can ever have. For that reason alone, it’s good to have him back.
