Hoop Dreams

In 1991, Magic Johnson woke up middle America to AIDS. At the time it seemed like the full-court press would save the day.

November 1, 1999 By Jeff Hoover

Apologies to Rock, Rudolf and Greg. In the morbid "who's the most famous person with HIV?" debate, a 6-foot-9 multimillionaire wins hands down. Eight years ago on November 7, at a jam-packed afternoon press conference in Los Angeles, Earvin "Magic" Johnson shattered middle America's smug insularity about a disease that had by then infected 500,000 Americans and killed almost a third of them. Although the news was bad, the 32-year-old basketball superstar couldn't resist flashing his trademark huge grin, reassuring us that he had the faith, the hope and the skills—all evidenced by his having led the LA Lakers to five NBA championships—to conquer the disease.

"Here I am saying it can happen to anybody, even me, Magic Johnson," he told us. Thousands took that to heart: In the days immediately after his announcement, calls to AIDS hotlines nationwide surged exponentially—120,000 calls flooded the National AIDS Hotline on November 8 alone, compared with an average of 4,000 in previous days. Some urban testing centers were forced to ask worried callers to wait months for an open slot when demand went up 300 percent in just one week. Meanwhile, resistance to AIDS education in many school districts—and throughout the African American community—weakened perceptibly for the first time, especially with the news that Magic's likely mode of transmission was unprotected heterosexual sex.

Reminiscing about Magic's announcement is sobering, for while he served time on the president's AIDS council and has indisputably helped to raise consciousness about HIV, the publicity has done little to halt what was even then a tragic demographic trend. In 1991, African Americans accounted for about a third of all reported AIDS cases—already a disproportionately high number—and the share has only grown since then, to almost half of all cases reported in 1998.

And Magic himself has had some rocky times: He tried a comeback as a player, failed during an abbreviated coaching stint with his beloved Lakers, hosted a widely panned and short-lived talk show and at one point even seemed to encourage rumors that he had been "cured." The mantle of HIV poster man has never rested easily on him—he's generally reluctant to discuss the virus (he was unavailable for comment for this piece) and has shied away from joining PR forces with AIDS groups perceived as gay. Although his announcement remains an important milestone in our unfolding AIDS history, it still seems as though Magic would do just about anything to remove the

implicit asterisk from his NBA records and get back to business shooting hoops.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.
http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/Hoop-Dreams-12094-5947