Baseball’s Dodgers Honor Player Glenn Burke, a Gay Pioneer Lost to AIDS

Major League Baseball’s first openly gay player, Glenn Burke is also credited with inventing the high-five.

June 6, 2022 By Trent Straube

Glenn Burke was the first openly gay player in Major League Baseball. His refusal to hide his sexuality got him traded from the Los Angeles Dodgers in 1978 and led to the decline of his career. He died of AIDS complications in 1995, but the trailblazing player’s legacy—he’s also credited with inventing the high five—continues to inspire.

On Friday, June 3, during the Dodgers’ ninth annual Pride Night, an event meant to highlight and include the LGBTQ community, the franchise honored Burke in a pregame ceremony that included over 40 members of Burke’s family, MLB reports.

> Last night, the Dodgers welcomed the family of Glenn Burke, MLB’s first openly gay player, in honor of #Pride Night. His brother Sydney threw out the ceremonial first pitch to @mookiebetts. pic.twitter.com/9OMp7cOsxJ
>
> — Los Angeles Dodgers (@Dodgers) June 4, 2022

“It means so much to all of us these many years later,” Burke’s younger sister, Paula, told MLB. “Glenn was our hero and a hero to so many others. They still admire him. He put a big crack in the ceiling for everybody else.”

As The New York Times reported, Burke, who was African American, was ahead of his time in many ways. He made his debut with the Dodgers in 1976. He didn’t hide his sexuality from teammates—although he didn’t come out publicly until 1982—and he was a colorful character.

“I tell you, he was the life of the party,” Dusty Baker, a former teammate, told the Times. “He’d get out and dance; he could dance his butt off. He’d crack on anybody, and we loved having Glenn around. Glenn was a big part of our team, man. And he was a hell of a ballplayer who was learning how to hit.”

Billy Bean, a baseball player who came out, credits Burke as an inspiration. Bean is now MLB’s vice president of social responsbility and inclusion. Watch the video below, “Dear Glenn Burke: A Letter From Billy Bean.”

Burke paid a price for his candor. Although teammates and fans adored Burke for his charisma and style, management was less tolerant. He was unceremoniously traded to the Oakland Athletics, where he was ignored before being completely shut out of the sport. His life spiraled without baseball. He contracted HIV, turned to drugs and was briefly homeless before dying of AIDS complications at age 45 in 1995, one year before lifesaving antiretroviral therapy became available.

In another AIDS-related story that resurfaced in recent years, Dodgers manager Tommy Lasorda, who died in 2021, had a son who was friends with Burke and who was also gay and in 1991 died of AIDS-related illness. At the time, the famed manager denied those facts about his son. To read more about that, see “The Tragedy of Baseball Icon Tommy Lasorda and His Gay Son Lost to AIDS.”

Getting ready. #Pride pic.twitter.com/CFRGMBOaSa

— Los Angeles Dodgers (@Dodgers) June 3, 2022

In related news, see the POZ blog post “The Glenn Burke Story” by Smart + Strong president Ian Anderson, who writes about the baseball player’s legacy and the documentary about the sports icon.

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