Magic Johnson Marks 30 Years Since Disclosing His HIV Status

Plus, as an ambassador for the NBA's 75th season, Magic Johnson encourages players and fans alike to get COVID-19 vaccinations.

November 9, 2021 By Trent Straube

Thirty years ago, an HIV disclosure stunned the world. On November 7, 1991, Magic Johnson, then at the height of his NBA stardom, held a press conference to announce that he had tested positive for HIV—the virus that can cause AIDS—and was retiring from the Los Angeles Lakers immediately. This was six years before effective combination treatment became available and at a time when an HIV diagnosis was widely viewed as a death sentence.

Much has changed since then.

Today, Johnson is "great" and thriving while living with HIV. Though he used to take HIV meds three times a day, he's down to one daily pill, and his virus is undetectable, he told CBS Mornings cohost Gayle King last week (you can watch the video on CBSnews.com and read the article here). What's more, he's a 62-year-old grandfather and the CEO of Magic Johnson Enterprises, an investment company focused on underserved communities. And he's an ambassador to the NBA, which is celebrating its 75th season; in that role, he encourages players to get vaccinated against COVID-19.

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> — Earvin Magic Johnson (@MagicJohnson) November 7,

Johnson also noted the November 7 anniversary in a tweet, writing: “God has really blessed me! Today marks 30 years living with HIV so the message resonated with me in such a tremendous way. I thank the Lord for keeping me, giving me strength, and guiding me for 62 years but especially the last 30.”

Johnson was diagnosed with HIV during a routine physical in 1991. He had been married to his wife, Cookie, for a little over a month, and they were expecting a child. She and the child tested HIV negative.

“The toughest thing I had to do was drive home and tell Cookie,” Johnson told CBS Mornings. “I loved her so much and hated to hurt her.… There was no greater pressure than driving home to her. Even today, it’s the toughest thing I’ve ever had to do in my life.”

Cookie recalled getting the news and realizing Johnson likely contracted the virus through sexual activity. “It wasn’t how he got it that was important to me,” she said. “It was, ‘You’re possibly going to die.’ That trumps everything.”

She said that at first she didn’t want Johnson to hold a press conference to disclose his diagnosis—she worried about the stigma associated with the virus—but her attitude changed. She wore a white suit during the conference, she said, to symbolize positivity and a bright future.

Johnson’s retirement from basketball was short-lived. The NBA allowed Johnson to play in the 1992 All-Star Game; that same year, Johnson was also a member of the Olympic “Dream Team.” He rejoined the Lakers for their 1995-’96 season.

Johnson’s return to the hardwood wasn’t without controversy—and it even made headlines again this year. “The fascist NBA won’t let Kyrie Irving play for refusing a [COVID-19] vaccine. But they still let Magic Johnson play with HIV,” tweeted an ignorant U.S. representative who is against requiring vaccinations. (For more details, see “Don’t Conflate Magic Johnson’s HIV and COVID-19 Vaccine Mandates.”)

It’s fitting, then, that as the NBA celebrates 75 years, Johnson, who is known for promoting health issues, has been tapped as an ambassador for the league. He has been vaccinated against COVID-19 and advocates for others to get the shots.

“I want the community to know, first of all, it’s safe,” Johnson said in a CBS Mornings segment about the ambassadorship and vaccinations. “And the players, people listen to them and follow them. Plus, the last thing is this, you have said to your teammates, ‘I’m going to be there for you.’ Well, you can’t be there if you don’t get vaccinated. You’re letting them down, and that hurts your chance of winning a championship. I would never to that to my teammates.”

In related news, Johnson participated in a CNN town hall about the coronavirus in April 2020, as the pandemic was shutting down the nation. To watch the video and read more, see “Magic Johnson on the Parallels Between COVID-19 and HIV.”

For a collection of POZ articles on the basketball icon, click #Magic Johnson. You’ll find headlines such as “How Magic Johnson Told His Wife—and Ex-Lovers—He Had HIV” and “How Ex–NBA Commissioner David Stern Helped Educate the World About HIV.”

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