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Sports media has taught us about AIDS

One of the rules I always try to follow when filling this space is to write only about something that I know.

I know a lot about many sports, but not all, so it shouldn't come as a surprise that you haven't seen any hockey or rugby offerings here.

I'm going to violate my rule this week, however, to talk about two things that I know very little about, AIDS and AIDS awareness.

I would say that after Magic Johnson's press conference last Thursday, when the Laker point guard announced that he was HIV positive and would be retiring from the NBA, the number of AIDS-apatetic people in the country, if not the world, decreased markedly.

Even if his announcement didn't

perk up their ears, there is no question that the resulting media coverage did.

In the past, you could pick up a newspaper on a day-to-day basis and not always see a story about the disease, which attacks and destroys the human immune system. In the wake of Johnson's disclosure, you can't even pick up a sports section that doesn't talk about it.

And that's probably a good thing.

The New York Times, for example, has bumped its AIDS-related articles into the sports section over the last couple of days. There have been stories on the "dangers" of contracting the disease through playing sports, reactions from doctors worldwide on Magic's prognosis, and even articles about federal legislation concerning the illness.

Where you might have expected to see sports statistics--a basketball boxscore, perhaps--there were statistics about what percentage of the population was HIV positive, what percentage had gotten that way through heterosexual sex (as Johnson said he did), and statistical projections for the future.

Almost all of the angles have been covered--even concerns such as Johnson's numerous endorsement contracts, reactions from basketball players and coaches from all

over the world, words from Johnson's closest friends, and stories about the effect of his illness on all those who have worshipped him as an idol.

It is really encouraging to see sports editors across the nation make the decision to play the role of educators and to make teaching and learning about AIDS that much easier. In the past, other issues tangential to sports haven't received the same degree of coverage.

Over the summer, as a camp counselor, I lamented the fact that it was getting harder and harder to explain sports to children. No longer was it enough to describe the fundamentals of play: talking about basketball, baseball, and football now leads to discussions of contracts, arbitrators, suspensions, and poor sportsmanship. These weren't things I had to learn from my dad and the others who have shaped my sporting knowledge.

When one of my young charges asked me why Patrick Ewing wanted to leave the New York Knicks (as he said he wanted to do all summer), I was at a complete loss. Describing "contractual freedom" to an eight-year-old is not the world's easiest thing to do.

How do you think Ewing would explain it to his own children?

AIDS isn't supposed to be a part of the sporting world either--at least, that's what we all thought before last Thursday. The thought of having to try to explain that a child, especially one who had followed Magic's exploits, greatly frightens me.

Thankfully in this case, the media, written and broadcast as well, has provided us with plenty of things to consider and to talk about, now that Magic has told us his story.

I'm sure it will provide a great deal of comfort to Johnson to know that his plight will not only help educate millions about AIDS and how to avoid it, regardless of how long he is around to spread the word himself.

But knowing Magic, I'd say he'll be around for a long time, helping us to understand AIDS a lot better.

**Walking A Fine Lion/
Jeremy R. Feinberg**