

The Last American Hero

In 1973, director Lamont Johnson released the filmed version of Tom Wolfe's 1965 essay "The Last American Hero." Alternately titled *Hard Driver*, the film starred Jeff Bridges as Johnson, as well as Gary Busey as Johnson's mechanic, and Valerie Perrine as Johnson's love interest. The film remains mostly true to Johnson's life story, emphasizing his background as a runner of bootlegged corn liquor, and garnered positive critical reviews for Bridges's performance.

practicing and a Pontiac would come by, I'd grab one, get as close to it as I could and hang onto it, and they couldn't get away from me," Johnson told Clendennen. "Cotton Owens and Jack Smith come over and told me we really had that Chevrolet flying. Well, little did they know that they was draggin' me around the race track, there was no way possible to keep up with them any other way." Johnson applied what he had learned on the day of the race, as he explained to Clendennen: "I just held on to every Pontiac I could get hold of."

Johnson added to his growing reputation by refusing to rely on help from the Chevrolet factory in Detroit, opting instead to remain independent. This decision added to his prestige when he repeatedly became the driver to beat, which caused fans and writers alike to consider him a David jousting a mighty Goliath. By the time he retired from driving after the 1965 season, Johnson was a 34-year-old motorsport legend. As a team owner, he fielded NASCAR Winston Cup teams to 139 wins and six Winston Cup Championships until 1995, when he retired to his beef farm and business interests in northern North Carolina. In 1998, he was named the greatest NASCAR driver of all time by *Sports Illustrated* magazine.

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Sketch by Bruce Walker

Magic Johnson
1959-**American basketball player**

Had Earvin Johnson's earliest nickname stuck with him, he would be known today as "June Bug" rather than "Magic." A reference to his childhood proclivity for bouncing from basketball court to basketball court in search of a game, Johnson's later nickname gained preference when, as a high school player, his superior skills began to earn him acclaim. Magic continued to dazzle through his days at Michigan State University and in twelve years with the championship Los Angeles Lakers of the National Basketball Association (NBA). With his friendly demeanor and infectious smile, he shone as much off-court as on, becoming one of the world's best-known, and most well-loved, sports figures. Personally and professionally, he seemed unstoppable. In 1991, however, came an overwhelming test of this belief. At a November 7, 1991 press conference Johnson announced that he had contracted the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), which leads to the incurable, fatal Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome, or AIDS. True to form, Johnson has faced this obstacle head-on and with optimism. While he retired from the NBA following his announcement (returning for a brief stint in 1996), he has focused the same unyielding drive and buoyant energy he displayed on the court into numerous business ventures aimed at revitalizing largely African American areas of the nation's cities. In addition, he has become an unofficial spokesperson for HIV and AIDS awareness, promoting disease prevention measures and railing against the stigmatization of those who are afflicted. Twelve years after his announcement, Johnson still shows no signs of AIDS himself, and remains as energetic and focused as ever.

From "June Bug" to "Magic"

Earvin Johnson Jr. was born on August 14, 1959 in Lansing, Michigan, the middle of seven children. His father, Earvin Sr. worked on an assembly line at Gen-



Earvin "Magic" Johnson

eral Motors and held a second job hauling garbage; his mother Christine worked as a janitor and cafeteria worker at a local school while taking primary responsibility for rearing the children. Johnson was expected to adopt the same tireless work ethic as his parents. "You want five dollars Junior?" his father would ask, as Johnson recalled in his autobiography. "Here, take the lawn mower. There's a lot of grass in this town, and I bet you could earn that money real quick." When Earvin Sr. did relax, he often did so by watching basketball and critiquing the players' moves. Johnson took keen note and then hit all the courts in the neighborhood to try out what he learned. This is when his older neighbors began to call him "June Bug." All the practice paid off, and by the time he joined the team at Lansing Everett high school he was clearly destined for greatness. It was during his sensational freshman year where, in one game, he scored thirty-six points and grabbed eighteen rebounds, that Fred Stabley, Jr., a sportswriter for the *Lansing State Journal* decided the rising star needed a nickname. Reasoning that "Dr. J" and "Big E" were already taken, he opted for "Magic." Johnson recalls that, while the nickname gave opposing teams, and their fans, additional heckling fodder, this only fueled his drive. "The name became a challenge, and I love challenges," Johnson recalled. "The signs and the slogans only served to fire me up." Johnson was named an All-State player three times and, during his senior year, led his team to the state championship.

Chronology

1959	Born August 14 in Lansing, Michigan
1973	Begins freshman year at Lansing Everett High School; named starter on basketball team and given nickname "Magic"
1975	Leads team to Class A tournament quarterfinals, named to All-State Squad
1976	Leads team to Class A semifinals, again named All-State
1977	Leads team to Class A championship, named All-State for third time, enters Michigan State University on basketball scholarship
1978	Leads MSU Spartans to Big Ten championship
1979	Leads Spartan to NCAA championship, named tournament MVP, sets new school record for season assists, begins rivalry with Larry Bird
1979	Foregoes remainder of college career to turn pro, drafted by the Los Angeles Lakers in the first round
1980	Proves instrumental in Lakers' NBA tournament win, named championship series MVP
1981	Son Andre is born on February 20
1987	Named league MVP
1988	Leads Lakers to yet another NBA championship, the first time a team wins two in a row since the Boston Celtics in 1969
1991	Marries Earleatha "Cookie" Kelly in September
1991	On November 7, publicly announces that he has been diagnosed with HIV and will retire from the NBA
1991	Named to President Bush's National AIDS Commission on November 15
1992	Johnson's Number 32 is retired by the Los Angeles Lakers
1992	Wins Olympic gold medal as member of U.S. "Dream Team"
1992	Son Earvin III is born on June 4
1992	Resigns from National AIDS Commission, citing the government's lack of genuine interest in fighting the disease
1992	Joins NBA All-Star team despite his retirement and named game MVP
1992	Aborts NBA comeback after several players express fear of catching HIV from contact with Johnson
1993	Founds Johnson Development Corporation
1993-94	Becomes Lakers head coach for 15 games at end of season
1994	Becomes minority owner of Los Angeles Lakers
1995	Adopts daughter Elisa
1996	Announces on January 29 that he will return to play for the Lakers
1996	Retires on his "own terms" on May 14
1997	Founds Magic Johnson Entertainment
1998	Hosts talk show, which is canceled after two months
2002	Named to Basketball Hall of Fame

Taking Off

Johnson stayed in his hometown for college, attending Michigan State University. As a freshman, he led the team to a Big Ten championship. In Johnson's sophomore year, the Spartans advanced to the 1979 NCAA Championship finals. It was in this game, against Indiana State University, that he had his first well-publicized match-up with ISU star and later Boston Celtic **Larry Bird**, with whom he maintained a friendly rivalry throughout his career. The Spartans won the game 75-64 and it was Johnson who was named the tournament's Most Valuable Player. After this stunning victory, Johnson forfeited his remaining two years of college eligibility and turned pro. He was the first pick for the Los Angeles Lakers in 1979 and became the team's key to winning the NBA championship that season. With star **Kareem Abdul-Jabbar** in-

Awards and Accomplishments

1974-76	Michigan Class A All-State Team
1976	Michigan Class A Championship Team
1979	NCAA Championship Team
1980	NBA All-Rookie Team
1980,	NBA All-Star Team
1982-92	
1980, 1982,	NBA Championship Team
1985,	
1987-88	
1980, 1982,	MVP NBA Championship
1987	
1982	All-NBA second team
1982	Citizenship Award
1983-91	All-NBA first team
1984	Schick Pivotal Player award
1984	IBM All-Around Contributions to Team Success Award
1987	Player of the Year, <i>Sporting News</i>
1987,	League MVP
1989-90	
1990, 1992	MVP NBA All-Star Game
1992	U.S. Olympic Gold Medal
2002	ROBIE Humanitarianism Award (Jackie Robinson Foundation)
2002	Named to Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame

jured and unable to play in the sixth game of the finals, Johnson started at center. Scoring forty-two points and grabbing fifteen rebounds, he led his team to victory and was named tournament MVP.

Johnson's second year for the Lakers was not nearly so magical. In addition to suffering a knee injury that forced him to miss forty-six games that season, tension had begun to mount between the popular player and his teammates. When the Lakers lost to the Houston Rockets in the first round of the NBA Championship playoffs, Johnson was largely blamed for the defeat. The fact that he subsequently signed a \$25 million contract to remain with the Lakers increased the animosity, and raised the ire of fans, as did his public criticism of Lakers coach Paul Westhead, who was fired the day after Johnson asked, via the media, to be traded. Following these events, Johnson was booed on many courts, both away and at home. Ever fickle, teammates and fans began to come around when Johnson, under new coach **Pat Riley**, led the team to a second NBA Championship in the 1981-82 season, for which he was again named MVP. Johnson also experienced a personal roller-coaster during this time: a high school friend with whom he had a brief casual relationship announced that she was pregnant. On February 20, 1981, Johnson's son Andre was born.

After losing the championship to the Philadelphia 76ers in 1983, the Lakers entered into one of the most enduring rivalries in all of professional basketball, alternating tournament wins with the Boston Celtics for the next five seasons. A second rivalry, between Johnson and Celtics star Bird, naturally built up over this time as well. While both Johnson and Bird initially lived up to the media portrayals of them as opponents off-court as

Life After Death

November 7, 1991, was one of those seismic Where-were-you-when-you-heard? moments in American culture. Even if you didn't follow pro sports, you knew Magic—whose last name, like Michael's and Larry's, was superfluous—was part of the holy triumvirate that had saved pro basketball. There he was, telling us, with the imprecise language that was part of his charm, that he had "attained" the AIDS virus, as if it were another goal he'd reached in a storied career: five championship rings, three MVP awards, three Finals MVP awards, one deadly disease. From what information he gave us in succeeding days, it was in fact a form of attainment, the consequence of sexual encounters—heterosexual encounters, Magic emphasized as rumors about his sexual orientation swirled—in offices, in elevators, with multiple partners, the profane fruit of the Penthouse Forum fantasy life available to superstars. ...

Ten years. Michael has retired, unretired, retired and perhaps unretired again. Larry is just gone. The Lakers have fallen and risen. And Magic is still here. Millions of young people have never lived in a culture without AIDS. Almost all of us know someone who has died of the disease, but almost all of us know someone who is living with it, too. Ten years. We know everything about AIDS. We know nothing.

Source: McCallum, Jack. *Sports Illustrated*(August 20, 2001): 70+.

well as on, exchanging glares and refusing to shake hands, the pair eventually became close friends. So close, in fact, that Johnson imagined the pair retiring at the exact same moment: "It's the seventh game of the Finals, the Lakers against the Celtics. There's one minute left in the game and score is tied. And then, suddenly, it's time to leave. Larry and I just shake hands, walk off the court, and disappear." Prior to retirement, though, Johnson credited Bird with pushing him to play his best ball. "We feed off one another, that's why we go on," he told the *Los Angeles Times*.

The Celtics won the first of the five-year string of championship bouts, spurring the press to, for a time, refer to Johnson as "Tragic" and his team the "Los Angeles Fakers." Johnson and his teammates turned it around the following year, however, beating the Celtics four games to two. The Lakers didn't make the final round in 1985-86, and the Celtics went on to take the title from the Houston Rockets. But the Lakers came back with a vengeance the next season, again beating the Celtics in the finals four games to two. That year, Johnson averaged 21.8 points per game, led the league in assists with 12.2 per game, and led his team to an NBA-best 65 wins. For his efforts, he was awarded his first-ever league Most Valuable Player award. He was named MVP of the tournament again that year as well. It was the last time he and Bird met each other in the NBA finals.

In 1988, Johnson faced another close friend across the court as the season came to a close. Playing the Detroit Pistons for the title this year, Johnson's and Piston guard **Isiah Thomas's** mutual respect and deep friendship was demonstrated when the pair kissed before the opening tip-off of Game One. Ultimately, Johnson went home with the trophy, as the Lakers bested the Pistons four games to three. By this time, the star of Hollywood

celebrities' favorite team—Lakers fans included Jack Nicholson, Michael Douglas and Michael Jackson—had become a celebrity himself, and he found it necessary to travel with bodyguards and reside in a guarded estate due to his immense popularity. Johnson and Thomas faced each other again in the 1989 NBA Championship, but this time Thomas emerged the victor, with Johnson sitting out a portion of the final series due to an injured hamstring. Still, Johnson was awarded his second MVP award for his regular-season play. While his team did not progress to the finals the next season (although Johnson was again named league MVP), Johnson made one more championship trip in 1990, facing the Chicago Bulls. Again, he emerged disappointed, with the Bulls winning four games to one. While he did not know it at the time, this series marked the end of Johnson's NBA career.

Off-Court Battle

The fall of 1991 started out beautifully for Johnson. In September he married Earleatha "Cookie" Kelly, a longtime friend. But just a few weeks later, during a routine physical examination, the seemingly invincible ball player tested positive for HIV, the virus that leads to the incurable and fatal disease AIDS. The world as he knew it came crashing to a halt. Johnson revealed the news to the public on November 7, 1991, and announced he would be retiring from basketball. The sports world was stunned. "I didn't believe it," UCLA player Ed O'Bannon recalled in *Sports Illustrated* years later. "When I watched the press conference later that day, it broke my heart. It was one of the lowest moments of my life because he was my favorite player of all time. We all thought he was going to die." Both Cookie and their son, Earvin II., who was born on June 4, 1992, have repeatedly tested negative for the virus. The Johnsons adopted a daughter, Elisa in 1995. Defying many of the stereotypes—and medical realities—of living with HIV, Johnson has yet to manifest any signs of the disease. This does not mean, however, that he was immune to the prejudices often levied against those with HIV and AIDS. After he made the announcement, people jumped out of swimming pools when he jumped in, afraid they would contract the virus, he told *Jet* in 2002. Indeed, he abruptly aborted a 1992 NBA comeback after many players expressed fear of coming into contact with him. Johnson did, however, play on the 1992 NBA All-Star Team and was named the game's MVP.

Johnson also began channeling his still-unbridled energy into AIDS prevention and awareness efforts. Soon after he announced he was HIV-positive he established the Magic Johnson Foundation to promote HIV/AIDS prevention and awareness. He briefly served on President George Bush's National AIDS Commission, but resigned on September 25, 1992, citing the government's lack of genuine interest in fighting AIDS as his reason. He still continues many of the duties he took on as a committee member, such as speaking at various AIDS



Earvin "Magic" Johnson

awareness events, helping to raise funds for research, and lending his words and well-recognized image to publications and public service announcements promoting precautionary measures. In one particularly bold move, Johnson has been candid about the way he contracted the disease, admitting that he often failed to practice safe sex and encouraging others to learn from his example. One byproduct of his efforts has been a growing realization that HIV and AIDS do not only affect homosexuals or people of certain races or classes. Johnson's current efforts focus on raising HIV and AIDS awareness in the Black and Latino communities

Building an Empire

Johnson has also been busy overseeing a number of business ventures, primarily aimed at revitalizing poor, largely African American urban areas and specifically targeting African American patrons. His \$500 million Magic Johnson Enterprises includes shopping plazas in Las Vegas and Los Angeles; part-ownership of movie theaters in Atlanta, Cleveland, Houston, Los Angeles and New York City; and part ownership in twenty-six Starbucks stores, with commitments to build nineteen others. True to his "do what can't be done" ethos, Johnson is the only outsider to enter into a financial partnership with Starbucks. "We always said no," Starbucks Corporation CEO Howard Schultz told *Sports Illustrated*. "But Magic had a vision, an idea, a genuine commitment to

Johnson*Notable Sports Figures***Career Statistics**

Yr	Team	GP	Pts	FG%	3P%	FT%	Reb	Ast	STL	BLK	TO	PF
1979-80	LA	77	1387	.530	.226	.810	596	563	187	41	305	218
1980-81	LA	37	798	.532	.176	.760	320	317	127	27	143	100
1981-82	LA	78	1447	.537	.207	.760	751	743	208	34	286	223
1982-83	LA	79	1326	.548	.000	.800	683	829	176	47	301	200
1983-84	LA	67	1178	.565	.207	.810	491	875	150	49	306	169
1984-85	LA	77	1406	.561	.189	.843	476	968	113	25	305	155
1985-86	LA	72	1354	.526	.233	.871	426	907	113	16	273	133
1986-87	LA	80	1909	.522	.205	.848	504	977	138	36	300	168
1987-88	LA	72	1408	.492	.196	.853	449	858	114	13	269	147
1988-89	LA	77	1730	.509	.314	.911	607	988	138	22	312	172
1989-90	LA	79	1765	.480	.384	.890	522	907	130	34	289	167
1990-91	LA	79	1531	.477	.320	.906	551	989	102	17	314	150
1995-96	LA	32	468	.466	.379	.856	183	220	26	13	103	48
TOTAL		906	17707	.520	-	.848	6559	10141	1724	374	3506	2040

LA: Los Angeles Lakers.

create a business in an underserved community that was both profitable and benevolent.” Johnson attributes his business success to the same driven personality that allowed him to dazzle on-court in the face of his high school basketball hecklers. “I got turned on when people said it was all over for me,” he told *Sports Illustrated*. “I wanted to show them I wasn’t going away.” Johnson’s short-lived 1998 talk show met with less success and was cancelled after two months.

Johnson has not left basketball completely. In addition to a brief return to the Lakers in 1996 and a glorious stint on the gold medal-winning U.S. Olympic “Dream Team” in 1992, he formed and coached a traveling exhibition team, “Magic Johnson All-Stars” and coached his old team, the Lakers, for fifteen games during the 1993-94 season, after which he decided to move up in the ranks and become an executive with and minority owner of the team. For all he contributed to the game, he was named to the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame in 2002. A decade after his whole life took such an unforeseeable shift, Johnson reflected on all he had achieved, and all he still would like to, with the trademark optimism that has been key to both his on- and off-court success and popularity. “Everything is for a reason; I don’t go back,” he told *Sports Illustrated*. “HIV happened for a reason. I’m a person who moves forward, and I continue to do it.”

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Sketch by Kristin Palm

Michael Johnson
1967-

American track and field athlete