



Amaechi, John (b. 1970)

by Linda Rapp

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John Amaechi.
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Closeted throughout his professional basketball career, John Amaechi is the first player from the National Basketball Association to acknowledge that he is gay. Since coming out, he has become an eloquent spokesman for glbtq rights.

Amaechi's parents, Wendy Hall and Jon Amaechi, met in Scotland while Hall was a medical student at the University of Aberdeen. After earning her degree, Hall took a job at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston but left it to follow Amaechi to his native Nigeria, where he fought in support of his ethnic group, the Ibo, in the Biafran war while she served as a medic.

When it became clear that the war was lost, the couple fled, enduring treacherous conditions before getting back to Boston, where they married.

Amaechi's mother returned to the practice of medicine, and his father established a manufacturing business. John Ekwugha Amaechi, their first child and only son, was born November 26, 1970. Within two years the couple also had two daughters.

The Amaechis' marriage was not a happy one. Jon Amaechi was, according to his son, "emotionally abusive to his wife" and also left her with "a mountain of debt" after signing over his business to her without her knowledge before going back to Nigeria. After a short while he returned, but the marriage was over.

In 1974 Wendy Amaechi took her three children to her native England, and they all moved in with her parents in a suburb of Manchester. Jon Amaechi turned up in England from time to time, threatening to seize the children and disappear with them in Nigeria. Wendy Amaechi prevented any contact, however, and by the time Amaechi was ten, his father ended his relationship with the family.

When Amaechi learned of his father's death through an e-mail many years later, he felt no grief at his passing and declined an invitation to speak at his funeral.

As a boy, Amaechi was an unlikely prospect to become a sports star. He enjoyed reading, had little interest in athletics, and loathed physical education classes. A fondness for sweets led him to be overweight. Because of his corpulence, combined with his extraordinary height--he was almost six feet tall by the age of ten--classmates dubbed him a "whale," among other hurtful taunts. Teachers did nothing to stop the name-calling, but Amaechi's mother tried to reassure him by explaining that the bullies suffered from "a poverty of spirit." Nevertheless, the young Amaechi was stung by his schoolmates' attitude and wished that he had not been singled out for being different.

While in his teens, Amaechi became aware of another kind of difference. Daunted by the alleged escapades of his classmates with girls, he considered "sexuality . . . a bigger mystery than any Hardy Boys caper." His "first glimmer" of his true nature came at the age of fifteen when he was assigned to shower monitor duty and beheld a "procession of young men, clad only in underwear, . . . [which] for some reason that was lost

on me . . . was an exhilarating sight." Amaechi did not immediately appreciate the implications of his feelings, chalking them up to "a generalized kind of eroticism kids feel at that age."

Although Amaechi's classmates made fun of him, school sports teachers felt that the hulking youngster's sheer size could be used to advantage. A lacrosse coach put him in goal, where he was peppered with shots from a hard rubber ball. Physical education teachers later reassigned him to rugby, which Amaechi describes as "an even more brutal sport" for which he felt no enthusiasm.

It was a chance encounter that sent Amaechi into basketball. When he was almost seventeen and already six-foot-eight, two representatives of a local amateur basketball club spotted him walking in town and invited him to join their team. Basketball was not a sport with which he was familiar. "Brits think of basketball the way Americans think of cricket," he notes, "a bizarre game played *over there*." Nevertheless, he signed up and discovered that "despite my physical awkwardness, it was clear I'd found a home on the court. There was no talk of whales or mutant freaks."

Amaechi's performance earned him notice in the small world of British basketball. He joined the Manchester team under Coach Joe Forber, who not only helped him develop his athletic skills as no other sports teacher had, but also remained a supportive force in his life and a true friend over the years. "Joe Forber," states Amaechi, "is more of a dad to me than my father ever was."

An accident almost brought a swift and sudden end to Amaechi's basketball career. While on a school field trip, he was reaching to open a plate-glass door but put his right hand through it. When the pane of glass collapsed, his arm was nearly severed at the wrist. It was only after some nine months of operations and rehabilitation therapy that he regained the use of it.

Meanwhile, Forber stood by the injured youngster, encouraging him to stay active and having him do drills with his left hand. As a result, Amaechi developed a high degree of ambidexterity, which would prove an asset to his game. More important, though, was the confidence that he gained from having a mentor who had faith in him.

Once Amaechi was back in shape and on the court again, he dreamed of a career not just in basketball, but in the National Basketball Association (NBA) in the United States. Since he was unknown to American college coaches, it was highly unlikely that he would be considered for a scholarship, and without one his mother could not afford the tuition rates that he would incur as a foreign student. They therefore decided that he should attend his last year of high school in the United States so that he might be recruited for a college team.

Dr. Amaechi insisted on finding a school with a top-flight academic program as well as a good athletic department. The chosen high school was St. John's Jesuit in Toledo, Ohio. Amaechi was impressed by the basketball coach, Ed Heintschel, whom he found similar to Forber in his supportive and encouraging attitude.

As the Amaechis had hoped, young John's performance as a high-school basketball player drew the attention of college coaches. Among the many who expressed interest in signing him was Bobby Knight of the perennial powerhouse Indiana University. Although Amaechi knew that Knight "only recruited the very best," he was not tempted by the offer. His early experiences in sports had led him to dislike "screamer coaches," and Knight, whose temperamental outbursts are legendary, certainly fit that description.

"Joe [Forber] and Ed [Heintschel] showed me there was a more humane, respectful way to get to the same place," writes Amaechi. "Winning really was everything, but only if it was accomplished honorably."

Amaechi chose to go to Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee after "a particularly good [recruiting] visit" with Coach Eddie Fogler. Once Amaechi was on campus, however, the relationship deteriorated. Fogler gave Amaechi little court time in games and, far from offering encouragement, eventually told him that he was not good enough to play in Division I.

In view of the situation, Amaechi transferred to Pennsylvania State University, which proved a much better fit for him. Although under the rules of the National Collegiate Athletic Association he had to sit out a "red-shirt" year before he was able to play in games, he practiced with the team and was pleased by the more congenial atmosphere and the helpful guidance of his coaches, trainers, and teammates.

At Penn State, Amaechi, who knew the importance of mentors in young people's lives, became one himself, joining the Big Brothers/Big Sisters organization to work with troubled children. Because of his diligent efforts to help his "little brothers" develop into responsible citizens, the police chief of the city of State College invited him to be part of a civic panel whose aim was to decrease truancy, and a local high school chose him as their commencement speaker. Eventually Amaechi's work had national exposure when the ESPN television network filmed a piece about him and his young charges.

Football has long been by far the most important sport at Penn State, but during Amaechi's years there in the mid-1990s, the basketball team enjoyed a fair degree of success. Amaechi, as their star center, became a campus celebrity. In the spring of 1995, his senior year, the team made it to the Final Four of the National Invitational Tournament.

Even as Amaechi was enjoying the adulation of basketball fans, he was facing a personal tragedy: when he was beginning his junior year, his beloved "Mum," after eight years of remission from breast cancer, suffered a recurrence of the disease, and this time the prognosis was terminal. Although she was frail, later that year Dr. Amaechi made a trip to State College and was able to see her son excel on the basketball court. The following spring Amaechi received an urgent call to come home because she was failing. He was at her side when she died at only fifty years of age.

During his time at Penn State, Amaechi also had to grapple with his sexual identity. He had recognized that he was gay, and he had a few casual sexual encounters but did not form any romantic attachments or explore the scene at State College's one gay bar. "I never hated myself; my desire for other men felt as natural as my right-handedness," he writes in his recent memoir, "It was simply incompatible with how I'd defined myself at the time, with whom I'd become on campus." He was also acutely aware that acknowledging his homosexuality would almost certainly put an end to his dream of playing in the NBA.

Although Amaechi had played well in college and had been named an Academic All-American in both his junior and senior years, his performance at pre-draft camps failed to impress the NBA scouts, and he went unchosen in the 1996 draft. In subsequent camps, however, he was more successful, and the Cleveland Cavaliers signed him to a one-year contract.

At the end of a season in which he had been played sparingly, Amaechi decided to join the European leagues, where he could earn more money and gain experience. He signed with Athens Panathanaikos, but quickly became unhappy with the sports culture that he encountered in Greece. Unruly fans furling dangerous objects--including ignited road flares--at players during games and sometimes vandalized the cars of those with whom they were dissatisfied. Alarmed by the violence, Amaechi quit before the end of the season and returned to Britain.

In 1997 he planned to attempt an NBA comeback, but a broken toe prevented him from participating in the Portland Trailblazers' try-out camp. His agent found him a spot on another European team, the Kinder Basketball Club of Bologna, Italy. The atmosphere in the arenas was much more congenial than it had been

in Greece, but Amaechi felt isolated and lonely. "I'd been coming home to an empty apartment for far too long," he recalls.

He turned for emotional support to Sandy Meyer, who had been his academic advisor at Penn State. In the course of a tearful, two-hour, trans-Atlantic conversation, "I finally worked up the courage to use my name and *gay* in the same sentence."

Shortly after the emotional discussion, Amaechi went home to England. He had been wishing to leave Bologna, where he felt so alone, and the fact that the club was behind in paying him only hastened his decision.

His new team was the Sharks of Sheffield, a city not far from Manchester. Amaechi was delighted to be around his sisters again but nervous about coming out to them. They were, however, completely supportive, as was an old school chum who said that he had known that Amaechi was gay since they were sixteen.

Amaechi began exploring the gay scenes in Manchester and Sheffield. After some tentative forays at dating, he entered into this first real romantic relationship with a male nurse whom he identifies in his memoir simply as Darren. The companionship made him feel that he had "finally found a safe place in the world."

Prior to the 1998-1999 NBA season, Amaechi returned to the U.S. for a try-out with the Toronto Raptors. He performed well, but the season began with a lock-out by the owners, and so Amaechi's agent lined up a lucrative deal for him to play in Limoges.

Amaechi, who is fluent in French, enjoyed his time in France because of the culture and the fact he was only "a Chunnel ride from home" and could still get together occasionally with Darren in London or Paris.

Amaechi was playing so well that he was attracting renewed attention from NBA scouts. His work as a non-roster invitee at the Orlando Magic's 1999 training camp led Coach Doc Rivers to choose him for the team. Amaechi was back in the NBA.

Amaechi and Darren had kept their romance alive across the English Channel but agreed that a trans-Atlantic relationship would be too difficult. They parted as a couple but have remained friends.

Amaechi began as Orlando's back-up center, but by mid-season he had been promoted to the starting line-up, and his fine play contributed to the Magic's surprising success in the 1999-2000 season. Sports pundits had predicted a dismal year for Orlando, but instead they were strong contenders, only eliminated from the play-offs in the last game of the season.

The eventual champions, the Los Angeles Lakers, tried to lure Amaechi away the next year, but he turned down a multi-million-dollar contract to remain with the Magic, who, under the league's collective bargaining agreement, could only offer him considerably less.

"This team needed me more than the Lakers did. This also was the first team that actually believed in me. And that should count for something. I couldn't reward their loyalty with desertion," Amaechi states.

At the time, Magic owner and Amway founder Richard DeVos assured Amaechi that he was a member of the "Magic family" and would "always have a place there," but at the end of the year, when he became a free agent and thus able to command a higher salary, DeVos made no effort to re-sign him. Amaechi therefore accepted a twelve-million-dollar, four-year contract with the Utah Jazz in 2001.

Amaechi had a tempestuous relationship with Utah coach Jerry Sloan, who Amaechi felt was not giving him

enough playing time. Amaechi later learned "from friends who worked in high-level front-office jobs with the Jazz" that "Sloan had used some anti-gay innuendo to describe" him. He suspects that his sexual orientation may have been a factor in Sloan's decision to trade him to the Houston Rockets after his second year in Utah. Sloan later denied knowing that Amaechi was gay.

Amaechi had not explored the gay scene in Orlando during his years there, although he did occasionally venture out to clubs when the team was on the road. In Salt Lake City he encountered and began socializing with other gay men. He enjoyed entertaining in his home, but he always remained there when guests suggested moving the party to a dance club.

Despite his discretion, some of his teammates apparently guessed his sexual orientation. When one, Greg Ostertag, asked him about it directly, Amaechi replied obliquely that Ostertag had "nothing to worry about." Another player, Andrei Kirilenko, sent what Amaechi called a "sweet invitation" to a New Year's Eve party: "Please come, John. You are welcome to bring your partner, if you have one, someone special to you. Who it is makes no difference to me."

Amaechi's career in the NBA was drawing to a close. He played little in Houston in 2003 and was dealt to the New York Knicks that December. At that point, having "no desire to start over," Amaechi had his agent arrange to have his contract bought out, and he retired from the professional game. He did, however, make a notable subsequent appearance on the court, leading the United Kingdom team to a bronze medal in the 2006 Commonwealth Games.

A focus of Amaechi's attention since his retirement has been the Amaechi Basketball Centres (ABC) Foundation. Amaechi established the organization in 2000, and the first ABC opened in Manchester in 2002. Seven more branches are planned.

The ABC Foundation's philosophy statement declares that "in principle the ABCs are a community resource using the medium of sport, more specifically basketball, to draw young people into an environment where positive interactions with authority figures and peers from all walks of life encourage the development of strong, healthy, and well-adjusted members of society." Although basketball is central to the program, the ABCs encourage both the physical and mental development of young people. The work of ABC is supported by a number of organizations, including The National Literacy Trust, Reading Is Fundamental, One Parent Families, the police force, and various schools and colleges. Amaechi's coach and mentor Joe Forber serves as the foundation's director.

After retirement, Amaechi became a television commentator, covering the broadcast of NBA games in the U.K. He has since become a regular guest on a variety of television programs.

Amaechi came out publicly in 2007, telling his story in a memoir, *Man in the Middle*. No other NBA player, past or present, has acknowledged being gay, so his memoir received a great deal of media attention and helped underline the problems faced by gay athletes in professional sports.

Reaction to Amaechi's revelation was mixed: he received "thousands of e-mails from people all over the world," most of them supportive but others hateful. Some of the messages even contained death threats.

The response from NBA players was also mixed. Voices in support included superstars Shaquille O'Neal and Charles Barkley. Grant Hill of the Magic expressed the hope that Amaechi's public acknowledgement of his homosexuality would "give others the comfort or confidence to come out as well," and Coach Rivers stated, "I actually think that when guys do come out, when that day happens, it will make it easier. I can't wait until it's not an issue."

More typical, however, was the comment of Amaechi's former teammate Troy Hudson, who said, "The majority of people in pro sports--I mean, in the world--don't feel comfortable with that kind of person around."

Cleveland Cavaliers superstar LeBron James criticized Amaechi for not coming out during his playing days. "With teammates you have to be trustworthy. If you're gay and you're not admitting that you are, you're not trustworthy," he stated.

Amaechi described James's comment as "naïve" since it did not show an understanding of the extent of homophobia in the NBA.

Tim Hardaway, formerly of the Miami Heat, gave voice to such bigotry by saying, "I hate gay people, so let it be known. I don't like gay people, and I don't like to be around gay people. I'm homophobic. I don't like it. It should not be allowed in the world or in the United States."

After being rebuked by NBA commissioner David Stern, Hardaway subsequently issued a less than convincing apology: "I shouldn't have said I hate gay people or anything like that. That was my mistake."

Amaechi deplored the hateful speech and its effects, saying, "Hardaway's words were like bullets ricocheting around society; they wounded people. I received e-mails from young kids, saying they were quitting their basketball teams because Hardaway had convinced them that being open about their sexuality would make their lives impossible. Words spoken in hate have a profound effect around the globe."

NBA commissioner Stern barred Hardaway from making public appearances on behalf of the league during festivities surrounding the All-Star Game, stating, "It is inappropriate for him to represent us given the disparity between his views and ours."

Hardaway also lost his endorsement deal with Bald Guyz, a maker of men's grooming products. Amaechi, on the other hand, became one of the few openly gay athletes hired to endorse products. He represents HeadBlade, which also makes grooming products for bald men.

Amaechi has become a spokesman for the Human Rights Campaign's Coming Out Project. His work involves visiting colleges "to create a dialogue on campuses . . . [and] also, in a more general sense, to try and create awareness of the coming-out process, how it is very individual for different people."

Amaechi is a most appropriate person for the task. He called the period of his own coming out "a time when I'm very resolved, have a great understanding of myself, and have come to some good peace."

"And that," he stated, "has put me in a position where I can be resilient enough, eloquent enough, and outspoken enough to do a good job not only for GLBT people but to try and open some minds in general."

In 2007, Amaechi served as the Grand Marshal of the Utah Pride Festival and of the Los Angeles Christopher Street Day Parade.

On June 13, 2011, it was announced that Great Britain's Queen Elizabeth II had awarded Amaechi the designation Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) for his services to sport and to volunteerism.

Since his retirement from basketball, Amaechi had earned a Ph.D. in psychology and had served as a sporting ambassador for Amnesty International and as a director of the Diversity Board of the London Organizing Committee for the Olympic Games.

In response to the news, Commissioner Stern said: "John Amaechi is an inspiration to millions, and a great

ambassador for his country and the sport of basketball. As a consummate professional during his playing days and through his continued community service, John truly represents the ideals of the NBA."

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