



Burke, Glenn (1952-1995)

by Linda Rapp

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Glenn Burke was the first major league baseball player to acknowledge his homosexuality publicly. Although the general public did not learn of his orientation until after his retirement, some people in professional baseball knew or suspected it during his playing days. Burke believed that homophobia in the culture of professional baseball impeded his chances for a more successful career in the game. "Prejudice just won out," he said.

Burke was born on November 16, 1952 in Oakland, California, where he grew up. His father, Luther Burke, a sawmill worker, left the family when Glenn Burke was less than a year old. The senior Burke continued to have sporadic contact with his eight children, but it was his wife, Alice Burke, who took responsibility for supporting the family on her income as a nursing-home aide.

Burke's athletic ability made him a star on the Berkeley (California) High School baseball and basketball teams. It was basketball that was Burke's primary interest at the time, and he dreamed of a career in that sport. His performance in high school won him an athletic scholarship to the University of Denver in 1970. He left the school after only a few months, however, saying that he could not abide the cold Colorado winter.

Back home in the Bay area, Burke enrolled in Merritt Junior College and played on its baseball team. Still hoping for a career in professional basketball, Burke considered going to the Golden State Warriors' training camp for a try-out; but in 1971, before the camp opened, Burke signed with the Los Angeles Dodgers, whose scout had been impressed by his play on the junior college team.

Burke spent the next five years on various minor-league teams in the Dodgers organization, preparing for a career in the majors. During this period he also came to realize that he was gay, and he had his first sexual experience with a man who had been his teacher in junior high school. He began frequenting gay bars both in the cities where he played and, when he returned home, in the Castro section of San Francisco, but he tried to keep his orientation secret from his teammates, fearing that such a revelation would be "baseball suicide."

In 1976 Burke was called up to the Dodgers. Expectations for him were high. He was nicknamed "King Kong" because of his size (6'2", 220 pounds) and strength. Dodger coach Jim Gilliam speculated that Burke might become "another Willie Mays."

Burke played his first major-league game at San Francisco's Candlestick Park. Afterward, friends in the San Francisco gay athletic community threw a party for him at the Pendulum, a bar in the Castro.

Burke's manager on the Los Angeles Dodgers was Tommy Lasorda, whose son, Tommy Lasorda, Jr., was openly gay and befriended Burke. According to Burke, the senior Lasorda could not accept his son's sexual orientation. (When Lasorda, Jr. died in 1991, his father said that the cause was simple pneumonia, not AIDS-related as many of the son's friends have claimed. Lasorda has consistently refused to comment

publicly on the topic.) Burke believed that the manager pressured his son to end the friendship. He even went so far as to allege that the Dodgers had paid Lasorda, Jr. to stay away from him.

Burke also claimed that Dodgers general manager Al Campanis pushed him to get married and said that the ball club would pay for the honeymoon if he did. Campanis would later deny that the suggestion was due to any suspicion that Burke was gay, saying that the organization liked young players to get married "because it tended to make them more serious about baseball."

In 1977 the Dodgers reached the World Series. Michael J. Smith, Burke's lover and the man who would write the 1982 *Inside Sports* article in which he officially came out, urged Burke to reveal his homosexuality during the series, but Burke feared that he would be ostracized by the baseball establishment if he did.

His apprehension was probably well-founded; in 1975 when *The Advocate* sent a request to all major-league teams for interviews with "players living gay lifestyles," the publicity director for the Minnesota Twins condemned the "colossal gall in attempting to extend your perversion to an area of total manhood."

Burke did not become famous for coming out in 1977, but he did secure himself a niche in baseball lore by originating the "high five" when he and teammate Dusty Baker exchanged an exuberant hand-slap after Baker hit his thirtieth home run of the year in his last regular-season at-bat.

In May 1978 Burke was traded to the Oakland Athletics. He believed that the Dodgers wanted to be rid of him because he was gay. He later stated that when some of his then-teammates went to the management to protest the trade of the promising young ballplayer, they were informed that his homosexuality was indeed the reason for it, but Campanis, speaking for the Dodgers, denied it.

In Oakland, Burke played for manager Billy Martin, who once said to the Athletics--while looking at Burke--"I don't want no faggot on my team."

Burke was unhappy on the lowly A's, who were having a particularly bad year in 1978. He returned to the team in 1979 but quit after only twenty-three games of the season. In 1980 he decided to try out for the team again but injured his knee in spring training. He spent the season in the minor leagues and then retired, convinced that he was not wanted in baseball.

In the major leagues Burke had a lifetime batting average of .237 in 225 games. He hit two home runs and had 38 runs batted in.

In 1982 Burke finally acceded to his partner Smith's suggestion that he publicly acknowledge his homosexuality. Smith's article in *Inside Sports* magazine revealed that Burke's sexual orientation was already well known within the baseball community. Davey Lopes, a former teammate on the Dodgers, said, "By 1978 I think that everyone knew."

Players interviewed for the article stated that some team members were uncomfortable with having a gay teammate. They also indicated that it would have been ill-advised for Burke to come out while he was playing. "If it had been out in the open," said Mike Norris of the Oakland Athletics, "there would have been all kinds of problems."

After baseball, Burke's life took a downward turn. He was active in amateur sports for a time, playing in San Francisco's Gay Men's Softball League as well as the 1982 and 1986 Gay Games. However, his amateur playing days came to an end in 1987, when he was hit by a car and suffered a leg injury.

Prepared for no career except sports, Burke tried to eke out a living through a series of odd jobs and eventually turned to panhandling. He had no home and depended on others for shelter, drifting from one friend to another in the Castro. He had also developed a drug habit. In 1988 he was arrested for possession

of drugs, and in 1991 he served six months of a sixteen-month sentence for grand theft and possession of a controlled substance. He was later jailed again for parole violations.

In early 1994, Burke learned that he had AIDS. His weight plummeted from a once-robust 220 pounds to 130. His older sister, Lutha Davis, took him in and cared for him during his final illness. He died on May 30, 1995 at the age of forty-two.

Since Burke's disclosure of his homosexuality, only one other major-league baseball player, Billy Bean, has come out; and, like Burke, he waited until after his retirement to do so. Bean, who had been apprehensive about the reaction to his revelation, was pleasantly surprised by the expressions of support that he received from fans and especially from former teammates.

Nevertheless, he feels that life on a professional team could be difficult for an openly gay athlete. In an interview in *The Advocate* Bean said that [i]t would take someone with the stature of Michael Jordan...[to] break down the barriers in Middle America."

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