

NBA player steps out of the closet and into the history books

By Katie Morell on 05.08.13

A major barrier in team sports was broken last week when Jason Collins, a 34-year-old professional basketball player for the Washington Wizards, came out as a gay man in an essay he wrote for Sports Illustrated. News spread quickly as the magnitude of the announcement set in: Collins will forever be known as the first active player in one of the four major U.S. professional sports leagues to come out of the closet. “I’m a 34-year-old NBA center. I’m black. And I’m gay,” Collins wrote in the magazine, seizing the attention of news media across the country. “I didn’t set out to be the first openly gay athlete playing in a major American team sport. But since I am, I’m happy to start the conversation,” he wrote.

Since 2001, Collins has played for six different NBA teams, including the Boston Celtics and the Atlanta Hawks. In the nearly 3,000-word essay, Collins explained that he first knew he was gay when he was just 12 years old and his twin brother was developing an interest in the opposite sex. He also explained that he never felt as whole as a person as when he came out to his aunt, a judge in San Francisco who greeted his confession with a warm and loving response, filling him with a sense of relief.

The tragic bombings during the Boston Marathon on April 15 inspired the timing of Collins’ announcement. In his essay, he wrote that the incident, “Reinforced the notion that I shouldn’t wait for the circumstances of my coming out to be perfect. Things can change in an instant, so why not live truthfully?” The recent Supreme Court fight for gay rights also weighed heavily on Collins’ mind. The strain of hiding his sexual preference was almost too much to bear for him in March when the high court heard arguments on rights for homosexual individuals.

Shifting Public Opinion

Collins decided to come out because of a noticeable shift in public opinion toward tolerance among Americans, he wrote in his essay. On Thursday Rhode Island became the 10th state in the country to allow same-sex couples to wed, making gay marriage legal throughout the entire New England region. Delaware followed suit on Tuesday.

“We still have so much farther to go,” he wrote. “Everyone is terrified of the unknown, but most of us don’t want to return to a time when minorities were openly discriminated against.”

Since the release of his Sports Illustrated essay, Collins has received an outpouring of positive support. Just hours after the story broke, he received a call from President Barack Obama commending him on his courage. “He seems like a terrific young man, and I told him I couldn’t be prouder,” the president told CNN. “One of the extraordinary measures of progress that we’ve seen in this country has been the recognition that the LGBT community deserves full equality – not just partial equality, not just tolerance, but a recognition that they’re fully a part of the American family.”

Collins wrote that he was not sure what the reaction of his fellow basketball players would be. But if this week was any indication, he has nothing to worry about. NBA stars Kobe Bryant and Steve Nash of the Los Angeles

Lakers went to Twitter to show their support and respect.

Collins has proved to be an aggressive and physical player on the court over his 12 seasons as a professional basketball player. In the 2004-2005 season alone, he led the NBA with 322 fouls, defying, as he explained, a commonly held stereotype of gay men.

“I hate to say it, and I'm not proud of it, but I once fouled a player so hard that he had to leave the arena on a stretcher,” he wrote.

Price Paid In The Past

While Collins may be the first active player from the major leagues (which include basketball, football, baseball and ice hockey) to come out, he is not the first professional athlete to do so. Tennis legend Martina Navratilova, who came out more than 30 years ago, told National Public Radio that the decision cost her many endorsement deals at the time because advertisers did not want a gay spokeswoman.

“But the price that I paid financially cannot be equated to the freedom that I felt by being who I was,” she said in the interview. Navratilova wrote in her own Sports Illustrated essay that she believed Collins’ decision will save lives.

“This is no exaggeration: Fully one third of suicides among teenagers occur because of their sexuality,” she wrote. She told NPR that she received letters herself from people who were ready to commit suicide out of despair about feeling alone until they saw her or read about her.

Among editorials following Collins’ declaration, one penned by Michael Rosenberg of Sports Illustrated stands out. He shares Collins’ view that most Americans are coming around to the idea of gay rights and that widespread tolerance is just around the corner. As proof, he points to an NFL player who tweeted a negative remark following Collins’ announcement. Rosenberg noted that not only did the tweeting football player receive a mountain of angry backlash, but also that he deleted his tweet and publicly apologized for his comments. “He [Collins] didn’t have to respond ... people responded for him,” Rosenberg wrote.

It remains to be seen how Collins’ announcement will affect his career. His contract with the Wizards is over and he will need to sign a new deal, with the Wizards or another team. “Now I'm a free agent, literally and figuratively,” he wrote in his essay. On Tuesday morning, Collins sat down with George Stephanopoulos of Good Morning America to discuss his announcement.

“I think, I know, in my personal life, I’m ready, and I think the country is ready for supporting an openly gay basketball player,” he said smiling. “I know that I, right now, am the happiest that I’ve ever been in my life,” he added.