

JOHN  
AMAECHE  
BUSTS

IN FIVE NBA SEASONS WITH CLEVELAND, ORLANDO AND UTAH, WORLDLY BRIT **JOHN AMAECHE** WAS GLAD TO PLAY THE OUTSIDER. BUT THE OUTSPOKEN BIG MAN KEPT ONE SECRET HE FEARED WOULD MAKE HIM A PARIAH. IN THIS EXCERPT FROM HIS NEW MEMOIR, *MAN IN THE MIDDLE*, HE TALKS ABOUT WHY THE LEAGUE IN GENERAL AND UTAH IN PARTICULAR ARE TOUGH PLACES FOR A GAY MAN

★ **PHOTOGRAPH BY SARAH A. FRIEDMAN**





# A

FTER MY FIRST WORKOUT WITH THE JAZZ, JOHN STOCKTON SAUNTERED OVER AND STUCK OUT HIS HAND. "I HAVE A GOOD FEELING ABOUT YOU," HE SAID WITH A SMILE. "YOU'RE GONNA HAVE A GREAT CAREER HERE."

The whole of Salt Lake City seemed excited about my arrival. I wowed 'em in my press conference, inspiring this over-the-top description in the *Salt Lake Tribune*:

"Amaechi's musical tastes range from Ella Fitzgerald to Eric Clapton; he designs gardens; he loves to cook and eat foods that are unhealthy, such as cheesecake and donuts; he is a cartoon addict, but also religious about watching the Discovery Channel; he doesn't much like jock talk, but he will jabber for hours about national drug policies, juvenile crime and social problems; he says he 'teeters between being opinionated and arrogant,' yet he attempts to be open-minded; he listens to opera before games, and he writes poetry, including this little ditty: 'The Earth is a stone, every crack a niche. To look is to know, to care to be rich.'"

In most Americans, such traits wouldn't be a big deal. But as a basketball player, they made me stand out. And they didn't know the half of it.

\*\*\*

**FROM THE** start, I was told there was one way to play in Utah, one scheme that had "always worked." Well, it worked for Karl Malone because it was designed for him and he was one of the greatest players ever.

I was no Karl Malone. Coach Jerry Sloan had signed me in the summer of 2001 because I was a 30-year-old big man with some nifty low-post moves and a smooth jumper and could score pretty consistently from 15 feet in. I lacked Karl's dominating presence (who doesn't?), but I was capable and eager.

When I brought up the ways the system didn't work for me, Jerry looked like he wanted to shoot

holes right through my heart. During one home game, I got slapped with a three-second violation. "Stupid f—ing c—t!" he screamed at me. The notion that he could motivate by name-calling showed how out of touch he was. Perhaps that tactic works with scared schoolkids. We were grown men. "F— you, Jerry! F— you!" I screamed right back. Jerry practically hit the Delta Center roof. Yanking me from the game, he pointed a long, bony finger in my face and ordered me out of the arena. I refused, planting myself in the middle of the bench. What was he going to do, have me arrested?

After the game, he suspended me. I'm a thoroughly nonviolent person by both temperament and philosophy, but I couldn't help fantasizing about a Latrell Sprewell moment.

Jerry raged against players who he thought didn't play hard enough. If we lost two or three in a row, he'd stride into practice yelling, "You f—ing a—holes are trying to get me fired! I'm not losing my job because you guys aren't hustling." During one of these job-insecurity diatribes, Karl looked at me and smirked, "If only we were so lucky." Then he went back to the posture he'd long ago adopted: working diligently while pretending Jerry didn't exist.

The whole "love the game" debate was absurd. I knew for a fact that plenty of guys didn't enjoy the game, because they told me so. Several of my teammates joked that they deserved their fat

bank accounts, fancy cars and mansions just for "putting up with Jerry's s—."

I wasn't going to be embarrassed by Jerry Sloan, because basketball had a proper role in my balanced life. I had a sneaking suspicion my basketball philosophy wasn't the bottom line anyway.

\*\*\*

**THE NBA** locker room was the most flamboyant place I'd ever been. Guys flaunted their perfect bodies. They bragged about sexual exploits. They primped in front of the mirror, applying cologne and hair gel by the bucketful. They tried on each other's \$10,000 suits, admired each other's rings and necklaces. It was an intense camaraderie that felt completely natural to them. Surveying the room, I couldn't help chuckling to myself: And I'm the gay one.

Homosexuality is an obsession among ball-players, trailing only wealth and

women. The guys I played

with just didn't like

"fags"—or so they

insisted over and

over again. But

they didn't under-

stand fags enough

to truly loathe

them. Most were con-

vinced, even as they

sat next to me on the

plane or threw me

the ball in the post,

that they had never

met one.

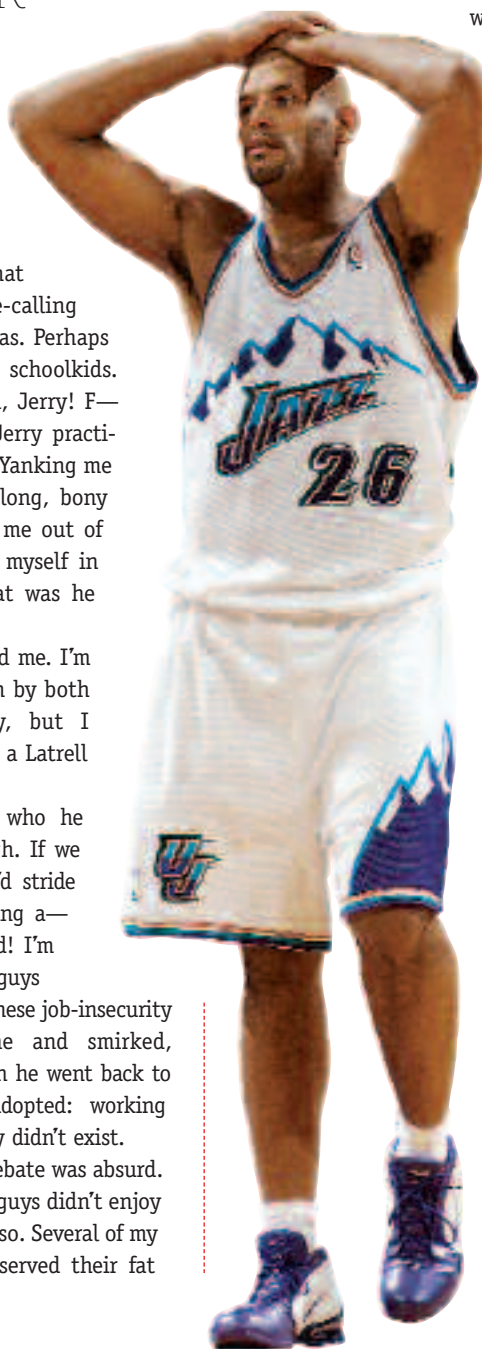
Over time, I real-

ized their antigay

prejudice was more a

convention of a particu-

lar brand of masculinity.



**A FRIEND SAID I MUST HAVE BEEN THE ONLY JOCK IN HISTORY "TO TOWEL OFF WITH MULTIPLE COLORS WHILE SINGING 'WE'VE ONLY JUST BEGUN.'"**

Homophobia is a ballplayer posture, akin to donning a “game face,” wearing flashy jewelry or driving the perfect black Escalade.

One night, as the team bus pulled into a West Coast city, I noticed a huge billboard towering over the road: “SOMEONE YOU KNOW IS GAY.” The minute I spotted it, I pulled off my headphones. I wanted to hear what the boys would come up with. Sure enough, a cacophony of shock and horror poured forth.

“If my kid grew up gay, I’d throw him into the street.”

“That’s disgusting—two guys together.”

The comments deteriorated from there.

On more than one occasion during my playing days in Orlando, I’d gone out of my way to confront teammates who spouted antigay slurs. As a leader on that team, I felt it was my duty to stand up whenever someone went off on a tangent that was detrimental to our cohesion. This time, relegated to Sloan’s doghouse, I lacked the credibility to speak up.

Even so, if I had to be in the repressive, Mormon capital of the Western world—stuck at the end of the bench for a coach who was always cursing me out—I figured I might as well enjoy myself. A fabulous existence was the best revenge.

And I do mean fabulous. With my guaranteed contract, I felt liberated. In Orlando, I’d avoided my

crowd because I worried about repercussions for my contract negotiations, my youth basketball center back home in Manchester, England ... my tenuous sense of self.

In Utah I still had plenty to lose. All the same fears—real and imagined—persisted, to a somewhat lesser degree. Utah employers are legally free to discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation, and there was plenty of evidence that my employer, owner Larry Miller, might do just that, having made his antipathy to gay people clear. (That never stopped his NBC affiliate, the source

of much of his wealth, from airing the lucrative *Will & Grace*. Later, one of Miller’s movie theaters banned *Brokeback Mountain*. I always wondered why one was acceptable and the other was not.)

But now I was ready to venture out. I made a beeline to the Avenues, the city’s “alternative” neighborhood. One day, not long after I arrived in Utah, I was hanging out at Cahoots—one of those off-color card places that sold everything from erotic magazines to rainbow flags to Mormon Temple shot glasses—with my friend Nancy. She introduced me to the manager, Ryan, who immediately became my unofficial social ambassador. Ryan, his then-boyfriend, Steve, and I quickly became inseparable.

I never actually announced, “Yep, Ryan, I’m gay.” He told me later he wasn’t sure until he dropped by and heard the strains of Karen Carpenter coming through my front door—and then, once inside, found my place filled with fresh-cut flowers. The rainbow towel in the bathroom confirmed his suspicions. Ryan said I must have been the only jock in history to “towel off with multiple colors singing along to ‘We’ve Only Just Begun.’”

Through Ryan, I fell in with a great crowd. These guys were highly protective of my privacy and carefully vetted everyone I met.

Since I was still reluctant to venture out too far, everyone came to my closet—literally. It was frustrating only when it was time to say goodbye at 11 p.m., as they headed out to dance the night away. That would have to wait until my contract expired. I made it a rule to avoid public places where I might be

identified, even though on some level it made no sense; this was a community that placed a tremendous value on discretion. Everyone, it seemed, had something to lose.

It was the first time I’d lived relatively freely among my gay peers, and I luxuriated in every second. No one cared how tall I was or whether I was in the starting lineup. They knew how to look past sports, wealth and status—not to mention my stats, which were way down. They didn’t care how many boards I was pulling down or about my minutes per game. For all they knew, “MPG” was some new party drug.

Yet they were also the kind of guys who’d been excluded from the inner circle of athletics since they were kids, and though I could hardly claim to epitomize that clique, I could see the thrill in their eyes with their mere proximity to it—even if they didn’t know Malone from Magic.

I snagged them family-room passes, and the guys would hang at halftime and after the game. Ryan spent so much time there that he grew close to the wives and girlfriends of my teammates. There was, however, the occasional raised eyebrow when Ryan screamed, “Nice ass!” as I drove the lane.

\*\*\*

**I** **EVEN HAD** an experience unfamiliar to my life in the States: sex. I had a memorable drunken night with an adorable wrestler (what is it with those guys?) from the University of Utah. He showed up at one of my parties and refused to leave.

Friends often marveled at the fact that my personal and professional lives remained largely separate for so long. I took steps to stay out of the limelight, but I never went out of the way to cover my trail. When I was in New York during road trips, I’d check out Splash, a big gay club in Chelsea. In LA, I hung out at the Abbey in West Hollywood, a space so visible, the patio is outdoors. I mostly avoided clubs when in my hometowns of Orlando and Salt Lake, and I never did the Internet dating thing, but those were about the only limits I put on myself my last couple of years in the NBA. All it would have taken was a single anonymous cell phone call from inside Splash to Page Six and I would have been toast. I was hiding, but in plain sight.

It was not as difficult to stay out of the papers as one might think. First of all, players don’t hang out together as much as they once did. On the road, guys are assigned their own luxury suites, and we do our own thing. We all had a common interest in keeping our personal lives off the front page. Call it the basketball



**I WASN'T GOING TO LET JERRY SLOAN EMBARRASS ME, BECAUSE BASKETBALL HAD A PROPER ROLE IN MY LIFE. I SUSPECTED MY BASKETBALL PHILOSOPHY WASN'T THE BOTTOM LINE ANYWAY.**



version of “don’t ask, don’t tell.”

Plus, I had another convenient excuse: I’m English. It’s an old phenomenon, dating back to the film stars of the ’20s, when audiences would ask, Is he gay or is he British? Every time I did something eccentric, like bringing my fabulously flaming friends to games, people would quip, “Oh, he’s just English. Leave him alone.”

Still, by the end of my second season in Utah, I was practically daring reporters to out me. But it never happened. My sexuality, I felt, had become an open secret, which was fine by me. I’d left enough open to interpretation that suspicions were gaining momentum. Over the years, I’d become increasingly adept at deflecting questions from the press. I practiced gender-neutral pronouns. When a reporter asked about my romantic life, I’d say, “I’m not with anyone at the moment.” Or, “The kind of person I’d like to be with in the future is ...” I rehearsed the answers to questions I could only imagine.

On the court I was always known as a solid defender, but now my guard was collapsing. One night before a game, Greg Ostertag, with whom I’d become close, asked me point-blank in the tunnel, “Ya gay, dude?”

“Greg, you have nothing to worry about,” I said. It was clear Greg couldn’t have cared less. Looking back, I wish I’d confided in the gentle big man.

The same goes for Andrei Kirilenko, our talented Eastern European small forward. I called him Malinka, Russian for “little one,” and our non-American (or “un-American,” as I was sometimes accused of being) backgrounds created an obvious bond.

Sometime after Christmas of my last Utah season, in 2002, Malinka instant-messaged an invitation to his New Year’s Eve party. Then he wrote something that brought tears to my eyes: “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.”

I was hosting my own party, so I had to decline his invitation. But I had Ryan deliver Malinka a \$500 bottle of Jean Paul Gaultier-dressed champagne. Malinka’s generous overture made the season more bearable. It showed that in my own paranoia and overwhelming desire for privacy, I’d failed to give some of my teammates the benefit of the doubt. It was the boorish idiots who gave the rest of us athletes a bad name.

★ ★ ★

**THE DAY** I was packing to depart at the end of the season, my building manager said to Ryan, “I wish John had had a better time here. Perhaps if Sloan hadn’t known about John’s lifestyle.”

There it was: I’d been sent packing because Sloan couldn’t comprehend me, especially my sexuality. He dealt me unceremoniously to the Houston Rockets in exchange for Glen Rice, a once-terrific scorer who was near the end of his career. Unbeknownst to me, Sloan had used some antigay innuendo. It was confirmed via e-mails from friends who worked in high-level front office jobs with the Jazz.

Suddenly it all made sense. I’m not sure the great Sloan hates all “fags,” though I’m pretty confident he’s not exactly a gay advocate. No wonder I’d spent the bulk of the season with my ass planted firmly on the bench.

In the end, I asked myself why I’d bothered to hide at all. I’m not sure why I felt the need to stay away from those darkly alluring American nightclubs. I suppose I feared the aggressive sexuality, the love of the glitter of celebrity and gossip.

Perhaps I feared I would enjoy them a little too much, see what I’d been missing all these basketball years, and never want to leave. 🌐

From *Man in the Middle* (ESPN Books) by John Amaechi with Chris Bull, in bookstores now.

## DAN LE BATARD

### OPEN LOOK

## JOHN IS READY FOR THE STORM. I SUGGEST YOU GET READY FOR HIM

I’VE CALLED JOHN AMAECHI A FRIEND for more than five years, and I can tell you he is brilliant, introspective, complicated, brave, eloquent and generous beyond words. I can’t imagine anyone I’ve met in sports being as qualified for anything as he is to be a spokesman for whatever he is passionate about. But I’ve never heard him the way I recently did, when the news broke that he is gay a few days before he was prepared for it to break. His breathing, not unlike the decision to come out, was heavy and labored—as if he’d just finished running wind sprints. Terror—it is so draining.

“I feel exhausted already,” he said. “All this is about to happen, this complete unknown. I like structure. I’ve planned my entire life to this point. This wasn’t in there. I’m in the vehicle, but I’m a passenger now. There is no driver. But I did choose to open the door and get in, and it’s the right choice for a number of reasons. I’m sure that will become plain soon.”

It just wasn’t plain in the moment. What’s the saying? Courage isn’t the absence of fear but the ability to overcome it? Amaechi has never been so scared, which says plenty. Consider: When asked if he ever felt free in the NBA, he said, “Never. Just lonely and isolated and afraid.” The biggest relief in his career? When he got the call that it was over. He felt, in his words, “the deepest and most profound of sighs—every muscle in my body relaxing at once.”



The mantle—as the first openly gay NBA player—fits him. In two decades in journalism, he’s the smartest athlete I’ve known. He’s an activist and a scholar and qualified to be a therapist. Amaechi wants to go on O’Reilly. I can’t wait to see that.

There aren’t many barriers left to break in sports. The only way an athlete can be Jackie Robinson today is by being an active male player in a team sport who is gay. Amaechi considered coming out during his playing days, but feared losing everything, from his livelihood to the respect of his teammates to his profoundly important work with children.

“The person who does it while he’s active is going to have to be a quality player with a long-term contract,” Amaechi said. “I left my dying mother, my home and everything I knew to pursue this highly unlikely career, and I couldn’t risk all that by coming out during it. In six years, I went from fat bookworm to the NBA. People are going to try to diminish this by saying, ‘He wasn’t any good. Why should I listen to him?’ But I was there, in the league. Somebody has to do this first and properly, and I’m going to attempt to do that. It’s what any principled person of conscience would do when they’re confident and ready.”

Fear notwithstanding, Amaechi is all that—confident, principled, a man of conscience. He turned down the chance to play with Shaq and Kobe and a six-year, \$17 million contract (read: lifetime security) because staying for far less money with the Orlando team that discovered him was the right thing to do.

I talked to him again 12 hours after that initial fright, and he sounded confident, stronger, ready. Like himself, in other words.

“I’m back!” Amaechi kept saying, breathing so much easier. 🌐