

## Magic has his reasons for return

**T**HERE MAY BE more to Magic Johnson's desire to play again. The Korner has learned that Johnson's commercial opportunities have been drying up as spineless corporations bail out because the superstar is HIV-positive.

Most of Johnson's lucrative endorsement deals have evaporated and his people are finding it hard to find corporations willing to become involved with the first athlete who has publicly revealed he is HIV-positive.

Johnson's talk of returning to the NBA for the second half of the Lakers' season has nothing to do with money because he's an adept businessman and is in great financial shape.

His T-shirt company is making loads of money and his venture into the toy business with his dunking game has gone well.

But he is out of the public eye and sources say he is craving attention.

Kentucky Fried Chicken and Nestle, both major Magic vehicles, have canned his television and print ads. As has Converse, a long-time Johnson associate.

Johnson owns an interest in a Pepsi bottling company, but it does not promote Johnson in print or on the tube.

Brandon Steiner, who

runs a sports-talent agency in the city that matches athletes with willing companies, predicted progressive companies would run to get involved with Magic. He admits he was wrong.

"Companies are afraid of what the results will be over the course of time," Steiner said. "Using athletes is all about image enhancement. All products are 'use this and be like me'."

"With Magic, it's kind of a conflict. I guess companies won't utilize the guy despite the fact he's a once-in-a-lifetime athlete. He is one of the most popular people of all time. Companies don't want an association with someone with AIDS. They're still afraid."

"In the '90s, you would think someone would be progressive enough to do it. They would have to be incredibly creative, take the risk and step out front, but that's not the way it works in corporate America."

Asked if the companies that bailed had any justification, Steiner said, "In all fairness, things changed. He became a former player and a lot of the ads were geared toward him being an active player. But they all could have done so much more."

Johnson does have an involvement with Swatch, for which he will do luncheons with the proceeds going to AIDS research. But there will be no print or TV ads. He also signed with Upper Deck to sign memorabilia, but the company no longer runs the splendid ad he did with his son. Johnson also signed a deal with Colours clothing company, but nothing has come of that yet.

"He's probably surprised by all of this," Steiner said. "This is one of the top 10 most popular athletes on the face of the earth. To go from that to really dropping off... well, it's probably tough."

Steiner even understands Johnson's desire to come back to active play. In fact, Steiner feels a Johnson return to the NBA would be a boon to AIDS awareness.

"I understand the fears," Steiner said. "But I would have liked to have seen him stay in the game. It would have been unbelievable. It would have been chaos. It



**MORE MAGIC:** Magic Johnson has said he would like to return for the second half of the Lakers' season.

would have been incredible for the disease."

But not for Magic.

### BUCKING THE BOSS

Sources say Gene Michael and Buck Showalter spent most of the few hours before the trading deadline talking George Steinbrenner out of pulling the trigger on several outrageously lopsided deals.

We hear Steinbrenner, on the phone from Cooperstown, was practically frothing after the Jays acquired Rickey Henderson and was pressuring Michael to pull off a deal, whatever the cost.

Michael and Showalter refused to bankrupt the organization for a quick fix while every GM in baseball was banking that Steinbrenner would win out and overpay. It didn't happen, but it could have long-range effects for Michael and Showalter, who must bear the responsibility and hear "I told you so" from The Boss if the Jays pull away.

Gutsy stand by the two.

### LOSING AND LOVING IT

How weak are the Mets? Season ticketholders received a letter recently pitching their opening-day program when the Rockies played their inaugural game. Not bad, but the letter went on to push the game-night program for when Anthony

Young set the record for most consecutive losses.

Is this organization so devoid of pride that it is commemorating a record for ineptitude? It certainly seems that way.

### WHAT A DEAL FOR JAYS

The Athletics possibly have pulled off one of the great coups by trading Henderson to the Blue Jays for the final two months of the season.

The A's get Christ the King's Steve Karsay and a player to be named later. They also have the opportunity to sign Henderson when he becomes a free agent.

Sources say Henderson would love to land with the Yankees or the A's, so if Oakland comes up with the money, they would have gotten a can't-miss prospect by leasing Henderson out for two months.

The Mets could have done the same thing with David Cone last year but were not interested in re-signing the pitcher. It's not the only downside for Toronto, which will get first-round picks for Henderson if he departs.

Pat Gillick is so confident in his scouting department that he feels he can get another Karsay while also insuring a pennant with Henderson.

### HIT AND RUN



Jeff George

Colts QB Jeff George again has established himself as a vacillating wimp with his hold-out and demand to be traded. After an illustrious high-school career and seduction by virtually every college in the country, George chose Purdue and then quit. He transferred to Illinois, and left early to go pro. Now he wants out of Indianapolis because of the pressure fans are putting on him. The Colts should tell him to report or retire because they have too much money in this project to give him away.

Brewers officials quietly are watching the next owners' meeting. One higher-up said,

"If they don't get this revenue-sharing thing worked out, this franchise could be gone. We just can't compete in this market. And this is no bluff, just look at the books. We contended last year until the last week but couldn't sign (Chris Bosio or Paul Molitor) and now we're one of the worst teams in baseball. That's not a fluke."

Texas manager Kevin Kennedy is becoming one of the more disliked managers. One AL manager sneered, "The guy acts like he reinvented the game."

Dallas observers say there is no way Troy Aikman won't be ready for the Super Bowl champs' Sept. 6 opener in Washington. Aikman, who underwent back surgery June 19, is so far ahead of schedule, the team is concerned. No bad news yet.

Here's the real deal on who pays Paul Assenmacher what: The Yankees are responsible for \$500,000 of the \$900,000 remaining on this year's deal, and 60% of next season's \$2.5 million. Amazingly, the Yankees got the Cubs to assume all of the \$500,000 option buyout for the 1995 season.

Kenny Anderson will have to wear a protective brace on the hand he broke when he was undercut by John Starks last season. The Nets' point guard said the hand is healing, but the brace will guard against reinjury.

Recovering from a slump, Dave Winfield is on pace to get his 3,000th hit in September. Don't bet against it happening in New York on Sept. 16 or 17.

### FORDHAM FLASHES

The NCAA recently released the national graduation rates for athletes and Fordham University excelled in several categories, including graduating the highest percentage of black athletes. Manhattan College also fared well in that category, tying for sixth:

1. Fordham - 93%
2. Furman - 90%
3. Colgate - 88%
4. Notre Dame - 86%
5. Duke - 84%
6. (tie) Manhattan, Lafayette, Villanova - 80%
9. (tie) Georgetown, Boston College - 79%

The national average for the graduation rate of black athletes is 37% for Division I schools.