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## 'I'm gay': NBA player Jason Collins breaks barrier

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WASHINGTON (AP) - Last summer, NBA veteran Jason Collins considered joining an old Stanford college roommate, U.S. Rep. Joseph Kennedy III, at Boston's gay pride parade.

Collins eventually decided he shouldn't, because he wanted to keep his secret safe: For more than a decade as a professional athlete, he had remained silent about his sexuality, worried about what teammates, opponents, fans - the world, really - might think.

Then came the Boston Marathon bombings two weeks ago, which Collins says "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?"

So after having, he explains, "endured years of misery and gone to enormous lengths to live a lie," Collins became the first active player in one of the four major U.S. pro sports leagues to come out as gay. He wrote a first-person article posted Monday on Sports Illustrated's website that begins: "I'm a 34-year-old NBA center. I'm black. And I'm gay."

Most recently a little-used reserve center for the Washington Wizards after a midseason trade from the Boston Celtics, the 7-foot Collins is a free agent who can sign with any team. He wants to keep playing in the NBA.

And he plans to be in Boston on June 8, marching alongside Kennedy at the city's 2013 gay pride parade.

"I didn't doubt for a second, knowing he was gay, that he would be the one to do it," Kennedy, a Massachusetts Democrat, told The Associated Press. "I've never known him to look for publicity, or to look for the spotlight, but given that no one else would raise their hand, I knew he would do it."

Added Kennedy: "I'm so proud of him. And I'm so proud to call him a friend."

In an interview taped Monday and aired Tuesday morning, Collins told ABC's "Good Morning America": "I think the country is ready for supporting an openly gay basketball player."

His announcement Monday, nearly two weeks after the Wizards' season ended, immediately drew praise and backing not only from pals, current and former teammates and coaches, the NBA itself, and a sponsor, but also from the White House. President Barack Obama called him - "he was incredibly supportive and he was proud of me," Collins told ABC - along with former President Bill Clinton, and athletes in various other sports.

"I certainly appreciate it, as a gay person. Any time you can have someone this high-profile come out, it's just so helpful, particularly to young people. We've reached a tipping point," said Billie Jean King, a member of the International Tennis Hall of Fame who won 12 Grand Slam singles titles.

"We've got to get rid of the shame. That's the main thing," King said in a telephone interview. "And Jason's going to help that. He's going to help give people courage to come out."

In texts to the AP, Wizards guard Garrett Temple wrote, "I was surprised. I didn't know and I was right next to him in the locker room. It definitely took a lot of courage for him to come out. He was a great teammate," and rookie Bradley Beal wrote: "I didn't know about it! I don't think anyone did! I am proud of his decision to come out and express the way he feels and I'm supportive of that!!"

Collins' coach with the Celtics, Doc Rivers, drew a comparison between Monday's announcement and Jackie Robinson's role when he joined the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947, breaking the color barrier in Major League Baseball.

"I am extremely happy and proud of Jason Collins. He's a pro's pro. He is the consummate professional and he is one of my favorite 'team' players I have ever coached," Rivers said. "If you have learned anything from Jackie Robinson, it is that teammates are always the first to accept. It will be society who has to learn tolerance."

Los Angeles Lakers star Kobe Bryant tweeted that he was proud of Collins, writing: "Don't suffocate who u r because of the ignorance of others," followed by the words "courage" and "support."

Asked if he hoped other athletes will follow his example, Collins told ABC: "I hope that every player makes a decision that leads to their own happiness, whatever happiness that is in life. I know that I, right now, am the happiest that I've ever been in my life."

Collins said in the TV interview that he does not know of any other gay NBA players.

Even while hiding his sexual orientation, Collins says, he quietly made a statement for gay rights by wearing No. 98 with the Celtics and Wizards: 1998 was the year Matthew Shepard, a gay college student in Wyoming, was killed, and the Trevor Project, a suicide prevention organization, was

founded.

According to the General Social Survey, the public has grown increasingly accepting of gay relationships since the late 1980s. That survey found in 1987 that 76 percent of Americans thought sexual relations between adults of the same sex was morally wrong. That fell to 43 percent by 2012.

"I'm glad I'm coming out in 2013 rather than 2003. The climate has shifted; public opinion has shifted," Collins writes in SI. "And yet we still have so much farther to go. Everyone is terrified of the unknown, but most of us don't want to return to a time when minorities were openly discriminated against."

While some gay athletes have expressed concerns about how earning potentials could be hurt by coming out, King said she thinks Collins' openness could have the opposite effect.

"I have a feeling he's got a whole new career," King said. "I have a feeling he's going to make more in endorsements than he's ever made in his life."

On Monday evening, hours after his story appeared on the web, Collins wrote on Twitter: "All the support I have received today is truly inspirational. I knew that I was choosing the road less traveled but I'm not walking it alone."

Momentum has been building toward this sort of announcement from a pro athlete in a top league in the United States. NFL players Brendan Ayanbadejo and Chris Kluwe were outspoken in support of state gay-marriage amendments during last year's elections. Obama spoke about his support for gay marriage during his campaign.

The topic made waves during Super Bowl week when one player, San Francisco 49ers cornerback Chris Culliver, said he wouldn't welcome a gay member of his team. At the time, Ayanbadejo estimated that at least half of the NFL's players would agree with what Culliver said, at least privately.

On Monday, NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell sent a memo to teams reiterating the league's anti-discrimination policy about sexuality. It includes a section on questions teams cannot ask prospective draft picks and free agents. After the NFL combine in February, three players said officials posed questions about sexual orientation.

Earlier this month, the NHL and its players' union partnered with an advocacy organization fighting homophobia in sports, and Commissioner Gary Bettman said the You Can Play Project underlines that "the official policy of the NHL is one of inclusion on the ice, in our locker rooms and in the stands."

"I would say the NHL has been a force to kind of obviously embrace and encourage. ... What (Collins) did, I think it's definitely (good) for basketball, and the same for hockey, too. It's going to be encouraging for more guys to step up and just be open about themselves," Washington Capitals forward Joel Ward said.

Living in the nation's capital last month while the U.S. Supreme Court heard arguments about same-sex marriage had an effect on Collins, who says "the strain of hiding my sexuality became almost unbearable" at that time.

"Less than three miles from my apartment, nine jurists argued about my happiness and my future. Here was my chance to be heard, and I couldn't say a thing," he writes.

After being a first-round draft pick in 2001, Collins has averaged 3.6 points and 3.8 rebounds for the New Jersey Nets, Memphis Grizzlies, Minnesota Timberwolves, Atlanta Hawks, Celtics and Wizards. He's come to be known more for personal fouls - he led the league in that category one season - than flourish.

"I go against the gay stereotype, which is why I think a lot of players will be shocked: That guy is gay? But I've always been an aggressive player, even in high school. Am I so physical to prove that being gay doesn't make you soft? Who knows? That's something for a psychologist to unravel," he says.

As for what response other NBA players will have to his revelation, Collins writes: "The simple answer is, I have no idea."

"Openness may not completely disarm prejudice, but it's a good place to start. It all comes down to education. I'll sit down with any player who's uneasy about my coming out," he says in his account, adding: "Still, if I'm up against an intolerant player, I'll set a pretty hard pick on him. And then move on."

Former teammate Jerry Stackhouse, now with the Brooklyn Nets, wrote in a text to the AP: "I hope Jason is received well by our NBA family. ... I've already reached out to him personally to show support and will encourage more guys to do the same."

NBA Commissioner David Stern said in a statement: "Jason has been a widely respected player and teammate throughout his career and we are proud he has assumed the leadership mantle on this very important issue."

While Collins is the first male athlete in a major North American professional league to come out while intending to keep playing, several have previously spoken after they retired about being gay, including

the NBA's John Amaechi, the NFL's Esera Tuaolo and Major League Baseball's Billy Bean.

"I think he is immensely brave. I think it's a shame in this day and age he has to be immensely brave, but he is," Amaechi told the AP. "He's going to be a remarkable and eloquent spokesperson for what it is to be a decent, authentic human being - never mind just for gay people."

Rick Welts, president and chief operating officer of the NBA's Golden State Warriors, is openly gay.

"He probably knows what he signed up for. There'll be a whole bunch more television reporters and cameras than he's probably had in the past. ... There had been a long bit of speculation about when, who, how. I think that speculation has been put to rest now," Welts said, "and we'll always remember that Jason Collins was the first man to do this."

Collins says that if he remains in the NBA, he could face uncomfortable reactions from spectators.

"I don't mind if they heckle me. I've been booed before. There have been times when I've wanted to boo myself. But a lot of ill feelings can be cured by winning," he writes.

In February, former U.S. soccer national team player Robbie Rogers said he was gay - and retired at the same time. Rogers is just 25, and others have urged him to resume his career.

"I feel a movement coming," he tweeted after word of Collins' news broke.

Some female athletes have found more acceptance in coming out; Brittney Griner, a two-time AP college basketball player of the year and the No. 1 pick in the WNBA draft, caused few ripples when she said this month she is a lesbian. Sheryl Swoopes, a former WNBA All-Star, came out in 2005 during her playing days.

Tennis great Martina Navratilova, who came out decades ago, tweeted Monday that Collins is "a brave man."

"1981 was the year for me - 2013 is the year for you," her post said.

Collins told ABC that Navratilova was his role model.

"I look at her as one of my heroes. ... Hopefully going forward I can be someone else's role model," Collins said.

Sports leagues in Britain and elsewhere in Europe have been trying to combat anti-gay bias. But the

taboo remains particularly strong in soccer, where there are no openly gay players in Europe's top leagues and homophobic chants are still heard at some games.

Soccer "is not going to change," said Amaechi, who is English and now lives in Manchester. "If it wanted to change, it would change. It has the resources to do so. It doesn't want to change."

Justin Fashanu is the only significant British soccer player to have come out publicly, doing so in 1990. The former Nottingham Forest and Norwich City striker was found hanged in a London garage in 1998 at age 37. According to an inquest, Fashanu left a note saying that, because he was gay, he feared he wouldn't get a fair trial in the United States on sexual assault charges. Maryland police were seeking him on charges that he sexually assaulted a 17-year-old boy.

Among other athletes outside the U.S. to come out was Gareth Thomas, a Welsh rugby star who attracted widespread media attention in 2009 when he announced he was gay. He continued playing until retirement in 2011.

Orlando Cruz of Puerto Rico came out in October as the first openly gay professional male boxer. Canadian swimmer Mark Tewksbury came out six years after winning a gold medal in the backstroke at the 1992 Barcelona Games. Four-time Olympic diving gold medalist Greg Louganis of the U.S. revealed he was gay in 1994, a year before announcing he was also HIV-positive. Former Olympic skiing gold medalist Anja Paerson of Sweden announced last year, after retiring, that she was in a long-term relationship with a woman.

In SI, Collins recounts that the first relative he came out to was his aunt, Teri Jackson, a San Francisco Superior Court Judge.

"I don't think Jason looked at his life as being a trailblazer," Jackson said Monday. "He has no regrets coming out. And he wants to play. And we'll see what happens next."

Collins says he told his twin brother, Jarron, last summer. Jarron was also a longtime NBA center who last played in the league in the 2010-11 season.

"He was downright astounded," Collins says.

Collins writes self-effacingly about his journeyman NBA career and a parlor game he calls "Three Degrees of Jason Collins," explaining: "If you're in the league, and I haven't been your teammate, I surely have been one of your teammates' teammates. Or one of your teammates' teammates' teammates."

That joking, though, leads to a larger point.

"Some people insist they've never met a gay person. But Three Degrees of Jason Collins dictates that no NBA player can claim that anymore. Pro basketball is a family. And pretty much every family I know has a brother, sister or cousin who's gay," Collins concludes. "In the brotherhood of the NBA, I just happen to be the one who's out."

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