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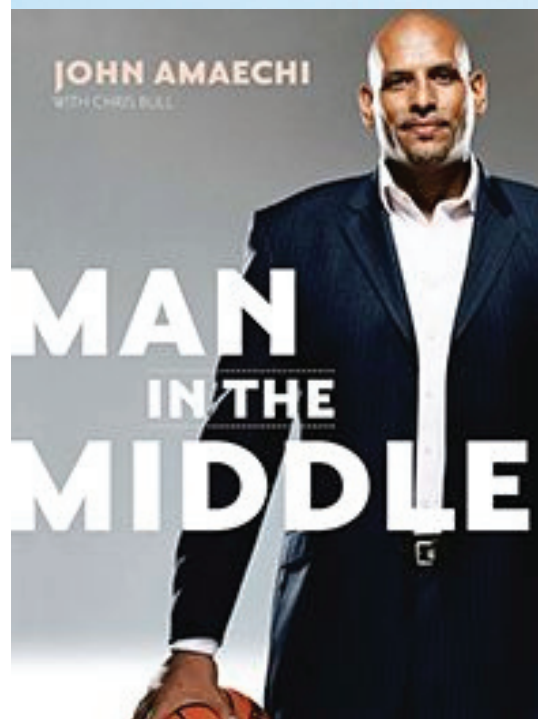
WESTWORD

WEB EXCLUSIVES

Amaechi chronicles secret life of gay athlete in new memoir

Man in the Middle
By John Amaechi
with Chris Bull
Hyperion 2007
290 pages

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The locker room is one of the most heralded places in all of sports. It is one of the only places where an athlete is allowed to be him/herself, not having to deal with fans or keeping up an image for the media. It's the place where basketball, football and baseball players (among others) retreat after a tough practice or a long game to relax and feel comfortable among their teammates. This is what makes being a homosexual so hard in sports: the possibility of disrupting the comfort of a team that relies on chemistry and interpersonal relationships. It is, no doubt, the reason why no male professional athlete in a team sport has ever "come out" while playing.

Man in the Middle, a memoir written by former National Basketball Association (NBA) player John Amaechi, tells the story of Amaechi's growing up in England, learning basketball, coming to America to chase his dream and hiding a secret from his teammates during his time in the NBA: the fact that he's gay.

Amaechi's decision to hide his sexuality was validated somewhat four days before the book was released. Having received excerpts from the book, Miami radio talk show host Dan LeBatard asked former Miami heat guard Tim Hardaway his opinion on the book and received a stunningly hateful response. Hardaway told LeBatard, "You know, I hate gay people, so I let it be known. I don't like gay people and I don't like to be around gay people. I am homophobic. I don't like it. It shouldn't be in the world or in the United States."

Man in the Middle does not fixate exclusively on Amaechi's sexual orientation, but rather sees it as one of many challenges the former Orlando Magic center has faced. As Amaechi notes, for the majority of his life, his time and effort were spent feverishly trying not to disappoint his mother and to become respected.

The book starts out with Amaechi's leaving Boston for Manchester, England, because of his abusive father. His parents had divorced when his father had become a threat to their lives.

As Amaechi recalls, it soon became evident that he was a different kind of kid, both physically and mentally. Amaechi writes that his body type was definitely eye-catching.

"By age 10, near the end of primary school, I already stood a head above my classmates at nearly six feet tall. In fact, I was taller than many of my teachers. There was no chance the other kids would catch up."

Not only was he gaining height exponentially during his early double-digit years, but the biracial Amaechi thought of himself as "brown-skinned and increasingly round. All those scones with clotted cream were adding up. In a school dominated by skinny white kids, I stood out not so much like a sore thumb but a fat one."

Although the storytelling of the beginning of Amaechi's life at times seems to be just a cry for sympathy, it helps set up the overall theme of the book: Don't ever give up no matter how bleak the situation. Amaechi battled with very serious depression in his early teens, claiming to be "fat and dumb. Over and over, I berated myself before bursting into tears."

The depression continued until he happened to catch the eye of two basketball coaches when he was 17 and 6'8". He eventually was introduced to Joe Forber, whom Amaechi believes is "the closest thing to a British basketball legend."

Forber took him in and drilled him incessantly, teaching Amaechi to break down the game into its components; "basics before skills," Forber would say. After his mother's insistence that he pursue his new love, he made "The Plan," which eventually called for him to play in the NBA.

He transferred to St. John's High School in Swanton, OH, from Manchester in order to begin his dream of getting into the NBA. After a stellar career there, he graduated and went to Vanderbilt in 1989, but due to lack of playing time and harassment from the coaches, he transferred to Penn State.

It was there he came into his own, both physically and emotionally. Amaechi blossomed as a player as he also came to grips with the fact that he was homosexual. He writes that he had kissed girls before and had dated a couple of them, but it "didn't have the spark," he adds.

His account of his time at Penn State is one of the most interesting parts of the book because Amaechi takes the reader into his mind and lets the reader see through his eyes. He shows how he came to grips with accepting that he was gay, the speculation of the hardships it would bring and his fear that revealing his true sexual orientation would disrupt The Plan.

Upon leaving Penn State, the undrafted Amaechi was signed by the Cleveland Cavaliers of the NBA as a free agent. Although his dream seemed to be finally coming true, Amaechi was cut and forced to perfect his play in international leagues, playing for various teams in Greece and Italy. Soon, however, he was back on the American hardwood, as he played like a man possessed with the Magic.

He was soon cut because of an upcoming big contract extension he was due, as well as the decreased need for a scoring big man with the addition of superstars Tracy McGrady and Grant Hill. He proceeded to sign with Utah, where he had a difficult time with an abusive coach (former Bulls star Jerry Sloan), who hurled homophobic epithets his way. Sloan has since denied suspecting that Amaechi was gay, a fact that lends credence to Amaechi's contention that he should not come out while playing. After shuffling between teams and seeing his playing time dwindle, Amaechi retired in 2003.

Man in The Middle, which was co-written by Chris Bull (who has collaborated with other gay athletes on their autobiographies), tells the story of Amaechi through intelligent dialogue and logical sequencing. Amaechi doesn't spotlight the fact that he is homosexual and how hard life is because of that. He writes an actual memoir, detailing the major events of his life and reflecting on how they affected him for either better or worse. His sexual orientation is just one facet of a complex man.

The book is constructed in such a manner that the chapters flow easily, and nothing seems randomly included. Amaechi writes the book as if the reader were watching a movie. Many people, places and events are thoroughly detailed, which helps create a full picture of how things were for him. He is highly informative in the history of European basketball, which creates a sense of how the sport is played and portrayed over there.

The book is unlike many other biographies or memoirs currently on the bookshelves. It skillfully portrays the upbringing and life of a man whose story is hard to replicate.

Man in the Middle, although a little bit slow at times, is articulately written and has a clear point attached to it: Give people a chance and don't be too quick to judge or give up on someone.