

News

PENNSTATE



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AMAECHI TO RECEIVE PENN STATE'S WALKER AWARD

University Park, Pa. -- John Amaechi of Manchester, England will receive the 1995 Eric A. Walker Award at Penn State's annual Awards Convocation Sunday, April 2, at the University Park campus.

The award recognizes one senior whose activities and achievements have enhanced the public esteem and renown of the University.

The starting center for the Nittany Lions basketball team, Amaechi graduated in January with a degree in psychology and a 3.24 average. He recently won the Anson Mount Award, the most prestigious academic award given at the national level in men's basketball. Nationally and locally known for his community involvement, Amaechi is active in the Big Brothers/Big Sisters organization and is a principal in the Congress for Children, Youth and Young Adults.

National Basketball Association

Amaechi takes bold step

First NBA player to publicly announce he's gay blasts Jazz

By Gene Farris
USA TODAY

John Amaechi played for three teams during his five-year NBA career, and when he publicly announces Sunday on ESPN that he is gay, his harshest criticism will be directed at the Utah Jazz.

Amaechi, 36, will announce he is gay on ESPN's *Outside the Lines*, his publicist, Howard Bragman, said Wednesday. The interview coincides with the Feb. 13 release of his autobiography, *Man in the Middle*, which will be published by ESPN Books.

In the book and in his ESPN interview, Amaechi called Jazz owner Larry Miller a "bigot," said former teammate Karl Malone was a xenophobe and said coach Jerry Sloan "hated" him.

Amaechi, a 6-10 center, played college basketball at Vanderbilt and Penn State and averaged 6.2 points with the Cleveland Cavaliers, Orlando Magic and Jazz. He retired in 2003.

Amaechi played for Utah from 2001-03 and averaged 2.6 points and 1.8 rebounds. Sloan said in a statement Wednesday: "John is one of 117 players I have coached in the past 19 seasons, and it has always been my philosophy that my job is to make sure Jazz players perform to the maximum of their abilities on the floor. As far as

his personal life is concerned, I wish John the best and have no further comment."

Cleveland Cavaliers star LeBron James said an openly gay person could not survive in the league.

"With teammates you have to be trustworthy, and if you're gay and you're not admitting that you are, then you are not trustworthy," James said. "So that's like the No. 1 thing as teammates — we all trust each other. You've heard of the in-room, locker room code. What happens in the locker room stays in there."

According to Amaechi's website, he is involved in the ABC Foundation, a group that encourages youths to become involved in sports. Bragman said Amaechi will work with established gay-rights groups, but declined to name them.

Neil G. Giuliano, president of Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, said in an e-mail to USA TODAY that GLAAD supports Amaechi: "This is an opportunity to confront the insidious problem of homophobia in sports. GLAAD is calling on media professionals — including and especially sports media — to examine and expose the hostile climate of anti-gay prejudice that continues to keep gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender athletes fearful of living openly."

John Gabriel, Orlando's general

manager when Amaechi played for the Magic, said he "played the best basketball of his career" there, averaging 9.2 points and 3.3 rebounds.

Doc Rivers, coach of the Boston Celtics who coached Amaechi in Orlando, said although his teammates may have suspected Amaechi is gay, no one treated him any differently. "It was brought up to me and you look and say, 'So what? Can he rebound? Can he shoot? Can he defend?'" Rivers said before joking about Amaechi's defensive shortcomings. "But with everything else, he was great."

Amaechi was signed as a free agent by the Cavaliers in 1995 and played one season in Cleveland before playing three seasons in Europe. He averaged 2.8 points and 1.9 rebounds his rookie season. Wayne Embry, the Cavs president when Amaechi was in Cleveland, declined to comment.

TNT analyst Steve Kerr, who played 15 years in the NBA, praised Amaechi.

"I don't think it's a big deal at all," said Kerr, who doesn't know Amaechi personally. "I don't think it's surprising. That's life. Everyone is different. I applaud him for coming out."

Amaechi would be the latest athlete to announce their homosexuality. Sheryl Swoopes, the three-time WNBA MVP who plays for the Houston Comets, came out last year. Former Minnesota Vikings player Esera Tuaolo and major league baseball player Billy Bean came out after their careers were over.

Contributing: David DuPree, Roscoe Nance, wire reports

Former NBA center

Former NBA player John Amaechi is gay during an interview Sunday morning, his publicist



Amaechi: Sexuality not the "best-kept" secret.

was never deep in the closet (his homosexuality) was the world."

► Reaction to Amaechi

Former NBA center Amaechi to come out

Former NBA player John Amaechi will announce he is gay during an interview on ESPN's *Outside the Lines* Sunday morning, his publicist, Howard Bragman, said



Amaechi: Sexuality not the "best-kept" secret.

Wednesday, Amaechi's announcement coincides with the Feb. 13 release of his autobiography, *Man in the Middle*, which will be published by ESPN Books. Bragman did not say why Amaechi decided to announce his sexual orientation. "I'd really like John to go into the whys and wherefores," Bragman said. "This is a really personal issue." He said Amaechi is in his native England this week and is expected to return to the USA on Saturday. "John was never deep in the closet," Bragman said. "(Amaechi's homosexuality) wasn't the best-kept secret in the world."

— By Gene Farris

The Advocate

John Amaechi steps off the court,
out of the closet, and into the fire.

HE SOUNDS TIRED, AND A BIT TESTY, NEITHER OF WHICH COMES AS A SURPRISE. John Amaechi '94 Lib hasn't been home in three months, living out of hotels on both sides of the Atlantic as he first prepared for, and then faced, the media storm sparked by the release of his memoir, *Man in the Middle* (ESPN Books, 2007). Normally, an autobiography from a 36-year-old former NBA journeyman wouldn't demand such attention, but Amaechi's book is different: In it, he publicly comes out as a gay man. A month after the book's release, the one-time Nittany Lion basketball star is in the midst of a relentless book and media tour he calls "exhausting, but also part of the job." As a self-appointed role model and spokesman for gay rights and, more broadly, social justice, Amaechi says, "I set out to create conversation and sustain it." Determined as he sounds, a little thing like exhaustion seems unlikely to get in his way.

By Ryan Jones '95 Com
Photograph by Geoff Smith



RJ: What's been your reaction to the attention the book and your announcement have received?

JA: I think the reaction's been overwhelmingly positive. I imagined that there would be a lot more negative stuff than there has been—notwithstanding that, the negative stuff has been *really* visceral. Really visceral, and pretty horrible. But it's been like 95 percent positive.

RJ: As far as the negative, [former NBA All-Star] Tim Hardaway's comments that he "hates gay people" have been the most blatant and public. Where are you hearing the rest of it?

JA: It's come from e-mails, it's come from people yelling things as they drive by, it's come from a lot of different sources. But the thing is, let's not pretend Tim Hardaway is the face of evil in America, or the face of bigotry. He may have stepped up to be their spokesman, but Ann Coulter is twice as bad, and people of her ilk who are more insidious and perhaps a little cleverer with their bigotry are far more dangerous.

RJ: That 95 percent must be heartening, though.

JA: It's really encouraging to know the vast majority of

people who have bothered to contact me are positive. But again, let's not pretend it's 95 percent of society as a whole. There are a great many people who tut-tut in their living rooms but don't actually write.

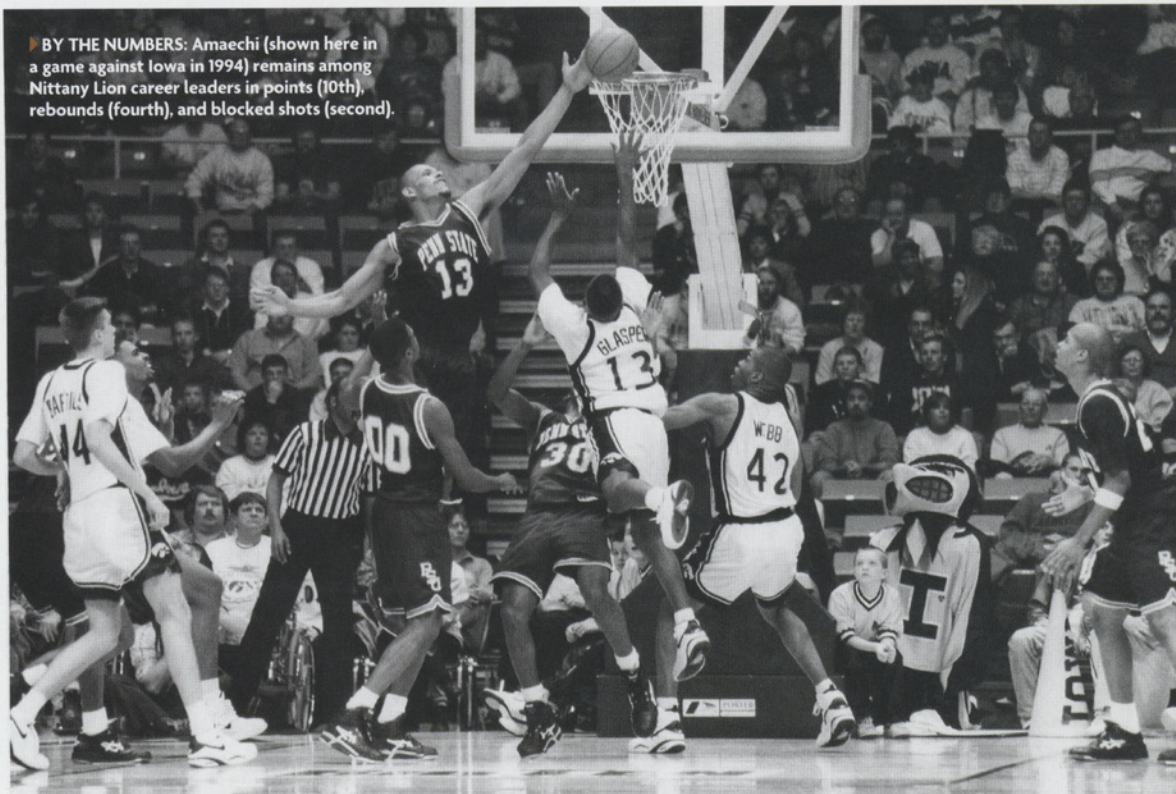
RJ: Has Tim Hardaway's response been the worst thing you've heard, or only the most public?

JA: No, it's the most public, but not the worst. I don't really want to make it so that people read this and then up the ante. But certainly, it's been to do with my death.

RJ: Death threats? Were you prepared for that?

JA: Oh, absolutely. This isn't the first time I've received death threats. There have been two different instances in the past where I've had multiple death threats. One when I took on the NRA ages back, when I played for Orlando, and the next time when I played for Utah, and I spoke out against the war—a viewpoint, may I add, that's quite popular nowadays, but wasn't then. So it's not new to me, and it certainly isn't the kind of thing that makes me shrink. I'm no violet, and I'm not going to change what I'm doing, so it's just part of the package.

► **BY THE NUMBERS:** Amaechi (shown here in a game against Iowa in 1994) remains among Nittany Lion career leaders in points (10th), rebounds (fourth), and blocked shots (second).



COURTESY OF PENN STATE SPORTS INFORMATION

RJ: There's a clichéd expectation that you might feel like you've had a weight lifted off your shoulders after coming out.

JA: No. It's nonsense. I was already living openly in England, so this is not some big new thing for me—it's a big new thing for other people. It certainly is something that I think is a really valuable task I've taken on, but I have a job to do now, and it isn't over yet. So I'll feel relief when that's over. When you can't get fired in 33 states for being gay, then it's over. When you can walk onto college campuses and know that, rather than just having a gay-lesbian-bisexual-transgender caucus, you actually have a campus that embraces GLBT people, then it's over. When the number-one swear word or epithet being used in high schools is not "gay" or "faggot," then it's over. So, there's some work to be done.

RJ: You've said that the NBA, and sports in general, weren't and still probably aren't ready to accept an openly gay player. Has anything that's happened since *Man in the Middle* was published changed your opinion?

JA: It's still the case, because society hasn't changed, has it? It constantly amazes me that people suggest this is a sports issue. This is a society issue. It's a workplace issue, and that's the major thrust of it for me. You know, there are teachers in schools and colleges who are fearful of coming out. There are engineers and architects and financial people in big business and small business who are afraid to come out. Real estate agents, people who work in TV studios and the media who are afraid to come out. So, unless there's some underlying, unfounded paranoia, there's a real reason why gay people don't come out, and it's not just in sports.

RJ: Your coming out is the obvious hook to sell the book and get attention for your story—you and your family fled an abusive father, you overcame social and racial stigma and suffered an accident that nearly cost you the use of your hand—and yet all the hype around coming out has overshadowed the rest of your story. Has that been a concern either way?

JA: No, no. I'm pretty good at bridging the subjects that

I'm talking about, and I'm pretty good at talking about what I want to talk about rather than what people want me to talk about. As long as it's created this interest, I can make sure that people evaluate the global issues. And the bottom line is, having people on talk radio, or your weekend warrior-type people when they go to the gym talking about these issues, people around water-

“The reaction's been overwhelmingly positive, but the negative stuff has been really visceral, and pretty horrible.”

coolers at work talking about these issues, even if it's specifically talking about me and the book, it does open a dialogue that otherwise wouldn't be happening in those environments, and that alone is positive.

RJ: The task of creating that discussion—has it gone as well as you've intended?

JA: It's gone exactly as I wanted it to. There hasn't been an interview that has been out of control. There certainly have been some that have gone in a very adversarial manner, and that's good, and there've been some that have been really compassionate, and that's good, but the messaging from me has always been the same. There's not been any wavering from what I'm willing to talk about and what I'm not willing to talk about. I think that's the key.

RJ: You were only at Penn State for a few years, but they were obviously formative years for both your life and basketball career. How do you feel when you look back on your college days?

JA: I always say that it's time that I would do again, because I had a great time at Penn State. It was an environment where I was nurtured on many different levels. Obviously I learned a lot of my basketball there, and perfected some of my skills, or at least advanced them. But I also was involved in so many different parts of campus life beyond sports—Big Brothers Big Sisters, Second Mile, the State College police department—and that's what made my experience good. I would've had a fun time, or at least a productive time, had I just been a basketball player and an athlete. But because I was involved in all manner of different things, I had a rich experience.

RJ: Are you still in touch with those people?

JA: All the kids—well, I've been in touch with the vast majority of them.

RJ: What's been their reaction to your coming out?

JA: Almost nothing, really. When you show unconditional love for somebody, it's a modeling process as much as it is one that makes them feel good. You are showing them how to express love for other people. My love for the young people I worked with was unconditional when they were abrasive and sometimes abusive, and so now that they're older, they return that and use that in their everyday lives. So, for most people, it doesn't matter. What matters is the fact that I cared about them when they needed to be cared about.

“I have a job to do and it isn't over yet. When you can't get fired in 33 states for being gay, then it's over.”

RJ: Do you have a favorite Penn State basketball memory?

JA: Nope. There isn't one. People always ask me that question, and there isn't anything in basketball at Penn State, and there really isn't anything in the professional ranks, either. Basketball was always very important, but that's not where the joy comes from.

RJ: You've struck a balance between self-deprecation regarding your playing ability, yet still taking pride in the fact that you developed from an awkward, overweight teen to a very good college player and an NBA regular. Is that a valid assessment?

JA: Yeah. I know I was the only British person to have had a career in the NBA, and that's great. But on the other hand, I put a ball in a hole for a living for 10 years. So, I don't want to get too fired up about it.

RJ: I remember you playing pickup ball at Rec Hall, with whomever was there—often a bunch of junior high kids—which was a pretty remarkable sight for an All-Big Ten performer. Are those the more vivid memories for you?

JA: I remember every Sunday morning, a lot of the State College junior high kids and some of the high school kids would come up to Rec Hall early, when

most people were still asleep, and we'd play. I do remember that vividly, and I am in touch with a few of those kids.

RJ: Are you in touch with many of your teammates from your playing days here?

JA: Yes. They've actually been really wonderful. [Since the book's release] I've heard from nearly everybody who I played with at Penn State.

RJ: Away from basketball, how did the environment in and around Penn State shape you as a person?

JA: It didn't have a massive impact. I think maybe if I'd been in a bigger city with a bit more of a cosmopolitan feel, maybe that would've helped me with my own introspection, but it wouldn't have changed my behavior. At that time, what was important was not failing in my quest to get my degree and

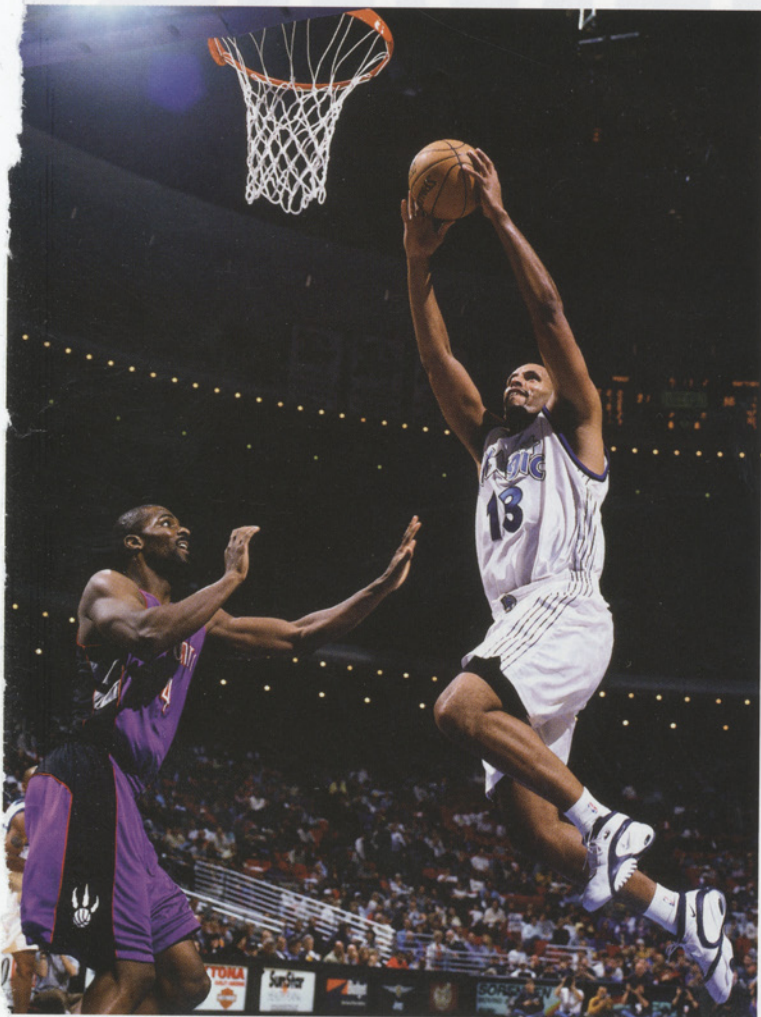
become an NBA basketball player. My personal life went into a box, and I diverted my energies into mentoring, campus organizations, extra time in the gym. That's where my energy went.

RJ: Are you often able to get back to State College?

JA: I'm involved in the alumni mentoring program so I've come back for that. I also received one of the alumni awards [the Alumni Association's Alumni Achievement Award] last year, and I'll be back on campus to speak this spring. In the past I was living in England almost exclusively, but now I've made a decision that I'll spend four to six months a year in America, so I will have an opportunity to come back more often.

RJ: Spending more time in America—I assume that's part of your position now as an advocate and spokesperson?

JA: I think I take the responsibility of being a role model pretty seriously, and not just a GLBT role model, either. I didn't expect when I played basketball that I'd only be a role model for black, British, moderately athletic tall people, and I don't expect now that I'll be a role model for only GLBT people. I have a wide-ranging set of responsibilities that range from political to being the person who stands up against people like Ann Coulter.



► **MAGIC MAN:** Amaechi's best NBA season came in Orlando, where he averaged 10.5 points per game for the Magic in 1999–2000.

RJ: You've mentioned Coulter twice now. Many of her critics argue that since much of what she says seems intended to instigate and bring her attention, maybe she shouldn't be taken seriously.

JA: It doesn't matter why she's doing it. People imagine that when people say evil things, that the words drop out of their mouths like rotten fruit, and don't affect anybody but in a local area right around here. And that's not the way it works. Their words are more like bullets, and they ricochet around the world and do collateral damage all over the place. People need to understand that when people say horrible, hateful rhetoric, those words make children die a little inside.

RJ: Penn State has found itself unexpectedly at the center of the discussion about gays in sports, with your book release and the settlement in the Rene Portland-Jen Harris case coming within 10 days

of each other. Did you pay any attention to that situation? What was your reaction?

JA: I think people who discriminate against anybody in a performance environment like sport aren't serious about winning. I think if you are the type of person who would honestly say no to the next Sheryl Swoopes, then you're not serious about winning. And if you're not serious about winning, you shouldn't be coaching at a world-class institution.

RJ: Do you have an opinion on the University's handling of that situation?

JA: Um.... I think that Portland is a long-standing member of the Penn State community, and she was treated as if she was a long-standing member of the Penn State community. But, there is a time for change in every environment, and it might be time for change. *[Note: This interview took place several weeks before Rene Portland resigned as Penn State's women's basketball coach. See story, p. 22.]*

RJ: Did you know Rene well while you were here?

JA: Yeah, I think she liked me. I don't know if she likes me now.

RJ: Once all this book publicity dies down and you're able to resume more of a normal life, what will keep you busiest?

JA: People get all crazy about this: I'm not a different person this month than last month. I'm a psychologist, I have a business and a charity; these things are the same. I'm simply taking up more of the time that I don't have to add additional responsibilities. But I'm not a different person. I am not now a gay and lesbian advocate and nothing else. I am all the same things that I was before, and this is added on. It's the way I work.

RJ: You've often spoken of your late mother as your biggest role model, and she's the central inspiration in your book. What would your mom have thought of all this hype and attention surrounding her son?

JA: My mother would be proud. My mother would be proud. I live my life according to making decisions that were in our plan, and making decisions that would increase the depth and breadth of my legacy, and as long as I make my decisions according to that, my mother would be proud. ▀

NBA ENTERTAINMENT/GETTY IMAGES/NATHANIEL S. BUTLER