

Off the Dribble - The New York Times N.B.A. Blog

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A Gay Former N.B.A. Player Responds to Kobe Bryant

By JOHN AMAECHI

Chris Goodney/Bloomberg News; Lucy Nicholson/Reuters John Amaechi said Kobe Bryant shouldn't fight the fine imposed for his use of an antigay slur.

After Los Angeles Lakers guard Kobe Bryant directed an antigay slur at a referee Tuesday night from the bench in a game against the Phoenix Suns, the N.B.A. fined him \$100,000. Bryant has apologized, saying his words should not have been taken literally. He said he would appeal the fine.

Kobe Bryant isn't some great, bigoted monster, as some have implied, but he isn't the innocent victim of some overblown one-off incident about a word that's "not even that bad," either.

This controversy is not a storm in a teacup turned into a vendetta by loony liberals, as many in the sports world seem to think. What our heroes say and do means something — and in an America where sports stars carry more influence and in some cases more credibility than senators, what they say matters more than ever.

When someone with the status of Kobe Bryant, arguably the best basketball player in a generation, hurls that antigay slur at a referee or anyone else — let's call it the F-word — he is telling boys, men and anyone watching that when you are frustrated, when you are as angry as can be, the best way to demean and denigrate a person, even one in a position of power, is to make it clear that you think he is not a real man, but something less.

I challenge you to freeze-frame Bryant's face in that moment of conflict with the referee Bennie Adams. Really examine the loathing and utter contempt, and realize this is something with which almost every lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender person is familiar. That is the sentiment people face in middle and high schools, in places of worship, work and even in their own homes across the United States.

Right now in America young people are being killed and killing themselves simply because of the words and behaviors they are subjected to for being perceived as lesbian or gay, or frankly just different. This is not an indictment of the individuals suffocated by their mistreatment, it is an indication of the power of that word, and others like it, to brutalize and dehumanize. This F-word, which so many people seem to think is no big deal, is the postscript to too many of those lives cut short.

As for the original apology, I am amazed that people still think apologizing in such a way as to make it clear that it was the victims who misunderstood is acceptable. I had hoped that the sorry-if-you-are-oversensitive school of apology would by now have been thoroughly discredited.

Many people balk when L.G.B.T. people, even black ones, suggest that the power and vitriol behind another awful slur — the N-word — is no different from the word used by Kobe. I make no attempt at an analogy between the historical civil rights struggle for blacks in the United States with the current human rights struggle for L.G.B.T. people, but I can say that I am frequently called both, and the indignation, anger and at times resignation that course through my body are no greater or less for either. I know with both words the intent is to let me know that no matter how big, how accomplished, philanthropic or wise I may become, to them I am not even human.

I am tired of people having this debate about the relative impact of pejorative words on their target minority group. If injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere, then the relative power of an antigay slur is irrelevant, it is simply a threat to human dignity, and that should appall us all.

I don't think Kobe Bryant is some vicious homophobe, but I do think he made a mistake and has sounded more like a squirming politician than a national hero since the incident came to light. When you know that people hang on your every word, you should take more responsibility when the wrong words spill out in anger. When you understand that people treat you like a god, you should endeavor to be more benevolent when you exceed expectations and more contrite when you let people down.

I started playing basketball at age 17 in the United Kingdom. I went from the fat child who hid in the corner of the library to starting in the N.B.A. six years later. Despite my efforts, I couldn't hold a candle to Kobe, but even with my limited prominence, I always knew two things: I was always under scrutiny and what I did and said mattered more because of that.

Kobe, stop fighting the fine. You spoke ill-advised words that shot out like bullets, and if the e-mails I received from straight and gay young people and sports fans in Los Angeles alone are anything to go by, you did serious damage with your outburst.

A young man from a Los Angeles public school e-mailed me. You are his idol. He is playing up, on the varsity team, he has your posters all over his room, and he hopes one day to play in college and then in the N.B.A. with you. He used to fall asleep with images of passing you the ball to sink a game-winning shot. He watched every game you played this season on television, but this week he feels less safe and less positive about himself because he stared adoringly into your face as you said the word that haunts him in school every single day.

Kobe, stop fighting the fine. Use that money and your influence to set a new tone that tells sports fans, boys, men and the society that looks up to you that the word you said in anger is not O.K., not ever. Too many athletes take the trappings of their hard-earned success and leave no tangible legacy apart from "that shot" or "that special game."

Kobe Bryant is powerful enough to make an important change in the way we look at real equality in sports and in general. Kobe is one of sport's heroes, one of sport's gods, and I hope it's not too much to ask for the occasional good deed worthy of those titles.

John Amaechi, a journeyman center, played for the Cleveland Cavaliers, the Orlando Magic and the Utah Jazz before leaving the N.B.A. in 2003. Four years later, he became the first N.B.A. player to acknowledge that he is gay. He wrote "Man in the Middle," a book about his difficult journey from an overweight, British bookworm to N.B.A. player while struggling to understand his sexuality in a masculine-driven sports culture. He now works as a psychologist, educator and social entrepreneur in the United States and Europe.