

Living with Aids virus:

Five years later, NBA star seems to have outwitted his HIV status

By JOHN KARIUKI

Five years after the news conference at which Magic Johnson confessed that he is HIV positive, millions are still wondering how he has remained alive and apparently healthy enough to return to his favourite sport.

Indeed, for one infected by a virus that gradually but surely weakens the immune system and the physical condition, his persistently good health has raised questions on how he has survived when many others just seem to wither away and die.

In an interview with *Time* newsmagazine in February, Johnson admitted having gained 30 pounds. He said he does a rigorous 700 sit-ups daily which is tough even for a healthy athlete.

There has been speculation that Johnson could be using Kemron, the Kenyan Aids drug which was launched with a lot of fanfare five years ago but was later trashed by American doctors.

But in what has turned into a major controversy at Aids conferences, some Black American doctors have defended Kemron and charged that those opposed to it do so for the simple reason of wanting to discredit African medical researchers.

They contend that the drug has not been given fair treatment by world health bodies. The Johnson-Kemron link was raised by *Newsweek* which quotes him as having told friends that he visited a Kenyan clinic to get Kemron — a report also supported by the authoritative *New York Times*.

But asked by *Time* about the basketball star's sustained good health, Michael Mellman who is Johnson's personal physician refused to discuss the issue citing doctor-patient confidentiality.

Johnson's wife Cookie says she has kept him on a diet of vegetables and fruits which she claims is the secret to his sustained good health. But in a previous interview, Johnson had admitted using AZT, the antiviral drug typically administered when a patient's helper T-cell count drops to 500.

He said he is no longer using AZT and that his T-cell count is above 500, but refused to disclose what he is taking claiming that if he did, everybody would start talking about it.

Whatever it is, it has worked miracles for him as witnessed by the millions of basketball fans.

For them it was as emotive as the announcement four years ago that he had decided to retire. At that news conference, Johnson sounded like a

man pronouncing his own death sentence and many fans were devastated.

The news of his return was broken by *New York Post* columnist Peter Vecsey. Johnson was playing his first game as a member of the Lakers against the Golden Warriors in February. Many people just wanted to see what the HIV virus had done to his once flamboyant game.

When Lakers' coach Harris signalled Johnson to replace Elden Campbell in the first quarter, the crowd rose and cheered and then settled down to watch Johnson who had once ranked as one of American basketball's all time greats.

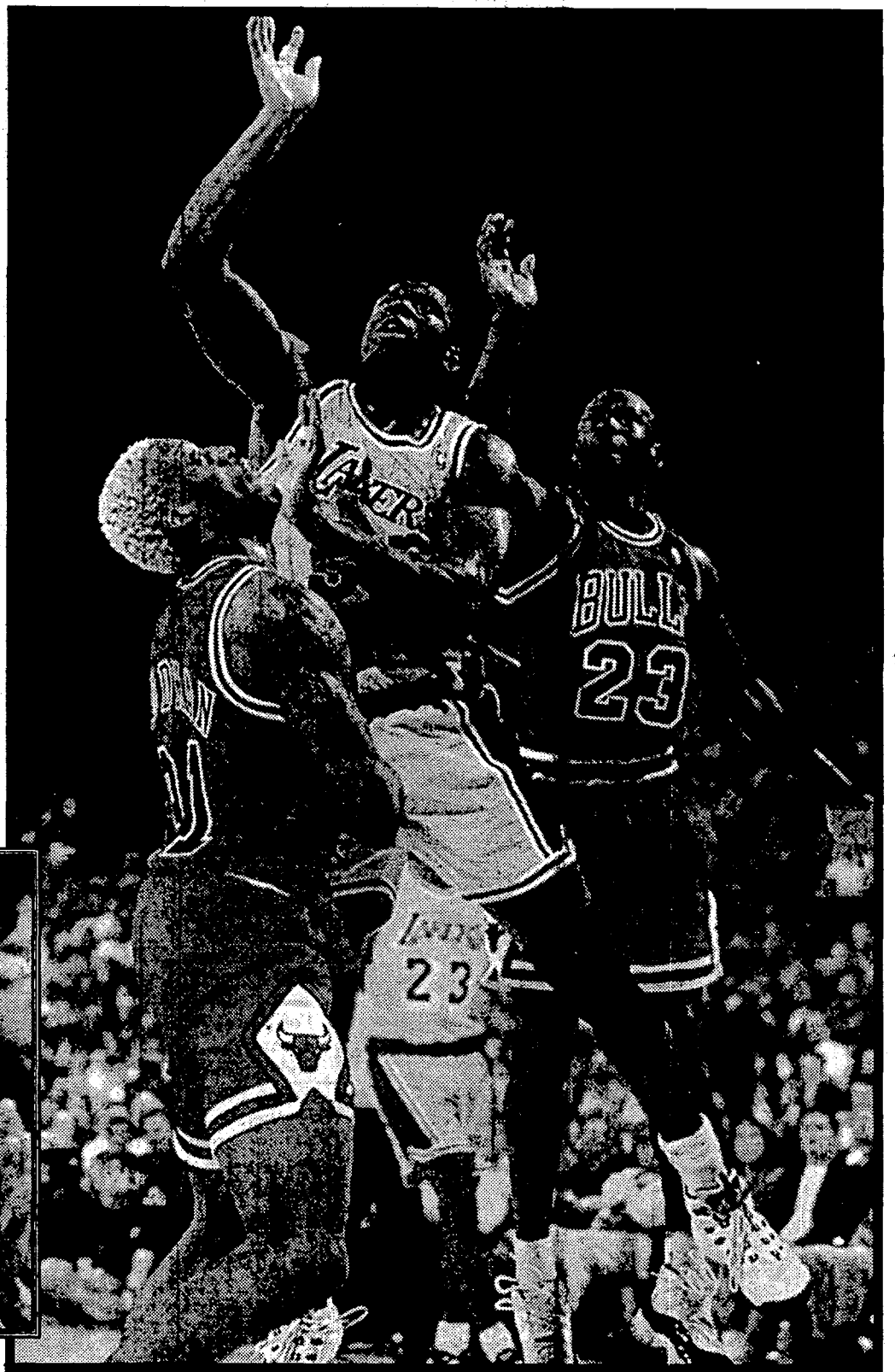
To the surprise of the Doubting Thomases and the delight of those who still believed in him, the man had the same old flair and his big smile lit up the forum with the clear message that Earvin Johnson was still magic as a person and a player.

He missed his first shot but so did Michael Jordan, when he returned after his brief flirtation with baseball. Seasoned fans excused the first miss and waited for Johnson to settle to the game.

He did and in time the magic was in full bloom as he did those old magical passes, the dummy jumps that clearly fired up his team.

At the end of it, the Lakers left 128-118 ahead of their rivals to rejuvenate Lakers in an NBA season that had looked down until Johnson's return.

The thrill of his first game set the stage for a tantalising match-up three days later pitting the Lakers



Top right: Magic Johnson (in Lakers jersey) soars above Chicago Bulls' Michael Jordan (right) and Rodman during his second comeback basketball game early this year. (Top left): Johnson's smirk of satisfaction. Above: Johnson's wife Cookie and son Earvin III cheer him on during the historic match: "You've got to fight for these Aids children and everyone else. Their stories may be different from mine, but we are still in the same boat"

against the Chicago Bulls which brought a Johnson versus Jordan show of two of the NBA's greatest stars.

It was a show of the giants which drew a capacity crowd including such renowned celebrities as actor Denzel Washington, Jack Nicholson and John Cusack.

The Bulls won but observers noted Johnson's improving performance.

By the end of it, the one bitter-sweet feeling was that his four-and-a-half year exile had been completely unnecessary.

Explaining his return Johnson said he had made the decision so that his children could see their daddy play.

"My son had heard from other fathers that his daddy was a great player but he couldn't play no more, blah, blah, blah. Now he'll get a chance to experience my playing, and he won't have people telling him — or myself telling him — that I couldn't."

His return has ultimately become a source of inspiration to millions of HIV victims, who now realise that they too can lead normal lives. Like other victims, Johnson has had to overcome the negative attitudes towards infected persons. They were more pronounced on his initial comeback bid in 1992 when fears of some outspoken NBA players forced him to call it off. But much has happened since in both Aids research and Aids education which has helped reshape attitudes on the virus and its victims. One of

those opposed to his comeback was Karl Malone of Utah Jazz, who now says he has no problem playing with him.

The case is put more clearly by Charles Brakley of the Phoenix Suns, who says: "It's not like we are going out to have unprotected sex with Magic on the floor. We're just going to play basketball, so I think we'll be OK."

But there is still some resistance like in the case of Vernon Maxwell of the Philadelphia 49ers who was quoted as saying: "You get scratched on your hand, and then he might get an open wound. I don't want to be there when that happens. I have a wife and kids."

That statement underlines the fact that the blatant discrimination Aids sufferers have been subjected to may have eased, but the stigma is still there. On the whole, the NBA may have made great strides, but it is not clear that the rest of society is anywhere near.

Certainly not even the US Congress which passed a mean-spirited provision in February which requires armed-services personnel with the HIV virus to be discharged from the military.

But the return of Magic Johnson is proof that HIV victims can lead near-normal lives and need not be ashamed of their status.

He was quoted as saying he has drawn inspiration from visits to children with Aids: "You've got to fight for these kids and everyone else. Their stories may be different from mine, but we're still in the same boat."

He was wondering whether he would ever play again when Chicago Bulls' Michael Jordan requested him to play in one of the pick up games organised while the Bulls star was doing a movie for Warner Brothers last year.

In a game against a team that included some of the best of the Chicago Bulls, Johnson scored nine of his team's 11 points. On the ride home he told a friend, former NBA player Lester Conner: "I needed this for myself. To know where I'm at. To know I can still play at this level against the best."

A few months later, Johnson was working out with the Lakers which was a young, talented but leaderless team.

Besides his skills as a player and Johnson's concept of team play, he also injected a high level of generosity which every team requires to win.

Perhaps the most important endorsement came from his wife Cookie. Talking to *Time* newsmagazine she said she had told him he had her blessings.

In time the notion that a regimen of NBA basketball would weaken Johnson and accelerate the onset of Aids has gone. His doctor has his fears but is optimistic.

Interviewed by *Time* on Johnson's return, Dr Mellman, the physician who originally informed him of his condition said: "We still do not know how much a body can take. But for Johnson, we are talking about returning to what used to be normal for him."