Advertisers pondering what to do with Magic

NEW YORK, Saturday

"Magic Johnson's stunning admission

that he has been infected

with the virus that causes Aids

creates a dilemma for marketers

that have paid the popular athlete

handsomely for commercial

endorsements.

What do they do now?

Some advertising experts said

people are so afraid of the disease

that Johnson's career as an effective product pitchman is over.

But others say the admission

made him a hugely sympathetic

figure and that companies who

drop him risk alienating customers.

They say there would be no

more compelling spokesman at

the movement than Johnson.

Some suggest companies could

score a huge public relations coup

by helping underwrite the Aids

education campaign that Johnson

wants to pursue.

A public service campaign like

that could address a growing

national problem, secure a company's

reputation as a solid citizen

and help sales, they say.

The Los Angeles Lakers basketball

superstar, .caught nearly

everyone by surprise on Thurs.

day in disclosing that he had the

HVI virus, which causes the incurable aids disease, and was retiring

from the pro basketball.

Several sports talent agents

said the disclosure probably ended

Johnson's commercial career

as well. Consistently rated among the most popular athlete endorsers,

Johnson makes an estimated

$2m to $12m a year from commercials

and other promotions.

His roster of recent sponsorship

ties include Pepsi-Cola Co.,

Converse Inc., Kentucky Fried

Chicken, Target Stores, Spalding

Sports Worldwide and Nestle

Foods Co. Those companies expressed

support for Johnson but

were non committal about plans

to use him in future promotions.

Minneapolis-based Target Evidently

is the only company currently

using Johnson in advertising.

Spokesman George Hite told

the *Saint Paul* Pioneer Press no

change were being made in that

campaign that runs until next

Friday.

Nestle announced five weeks

ago that it had signed Johnson to

a two-year contract to appear for'

its nestle' crunch candy' bar, but

hasn't aired ads yet.

"We support "Magic," Frank Arthofer, the president of Nestle

Chocolate and Confection Co.

Inc., said in 'a statement yesterday.

"We await the opportunity

to discuss our next step with"

him"

Advertisers generally shy away

from celeblities who have personal

problems for. fear that they

could reflect negatively on their

products. David Burns, who

. heads a service matching athletes

and advertisers in Chicago, said

he expected any company with

ads featuring Johnson on the air

would quit using them.

But Vangie Hayes, who hires

actors and celebrities for advertisements

created by J. Walter

Thompson, said such decisions

would depend of how Johnson

was used.

His infection with the Aids virus

probably means he would no

longer be effective in advertisements

emphasising his good

health and high energy, she said..

But she said advertisers could

probably find some other way to

use Johnson, such as by sponsoring

the public service campaign

against Aids for which he has volunteered

to be the spokesman.

Lloyed Kolmer;" a new York based

talent negotiator, said

Johnson is so well-like that he

"won't lose a dime" on· current

endorsement affiliations.

"I don't think he'll get new endorsements

but I am positive

that the people who now employ

him will not pull away from him

now," Kolmer said.

Michael Hughes, vice-chairman

'had creative. director at the

Martin Agency, an advertising

agency in Richmond, Virginia

said Johnson is "one of the few.

heroes out there' and his candid

admission of infection didn't diminish

that.

"If you are an advertiser, there

should be a lot of rewards tying

into a guy who is 'still a hero but

is now fighting ·on a different

court" Hughes said. "He may be

the most believable endorser in

the world now"

But at the same time, he said

companies would have to be careful

in how' they used Johnson to

avoid looking like crass

opportunists.

AP

Los Angeles Lakers star Earvin "Magic" Johnson drives past another star basketballer, Michael Jordan of Chicago Bulls, in one of his previous games. Johnson who told a news conference that he had

tested positive for the HIV virus and was retiring has been one of the most outstanding basketballers in recent times. Picture by Reuter

Bush expresses **infinite sorrow**

US President George Bush yesterday

joined the legions of

Americans 'and fans worldwide

expressing sorrow that basketball

start "Magic" Johnson has tested

positive for the Aids virus and

retired from the champion Los

Angeles Lakers.

"Oh, it's sad," Bush said when

asked about Jonson's announcement

as he began a second day of

meetings with NATO leaders,

"Good man."

"He's a hero to me, to everybody

that loves sports," Bush

continued. "I just can't tell you

the high regard for this athlets. I

saw the heartbreak of some of the

kids who idolise him. I think he's

a gentleman who has handled his

problem in a wonderful way."

Israelis reacted with dismay.

Newspapers from Madrid to Tokyo hailed him as a hero Portuguese

television said "his words

have made tears fall around the

world"

And a German News Agency

said Magic Johnson's retirement

had drawn as much attention in

the United States as the start of

the. Gulf War.

The *ABC* newspaper in basketball-

mad Spain called Johnson

"An upright, honest and human

sportsman" and said his retirement

felt "like a jug of cold water

on all the comers of the globe".

The Spanish daily *El Pais* devoted

two full pages yesterday to

"the Magic Man: A living legend

and a myth in world sport".

"Magic was the first to be responsible

for the unstoppable expansion

professional basketball

enjoyed in the world," *El Pais*

said.

In Israel, another country

where basketball rivals soccer as

the most popular sport, television

broadcast interviews with doctors

about Aids and Johnson's prognosis

for the future

Darryl Dawkins, who once battled

Johnson in the NBA and

now plays in Italy, said he was

shocked.

'Magic has always been a great

champion and· a model for: the youngsters" Dawkins said. "I

hope they can do something to

help him, to replay him for what

he has done for the sport, and not

only for the sports."

All six major Japanese television

networks carried the 'news

and Tokyo newspapers had banner

headlines such as *"It's a*

*tragedy. "*

Australian papers in Sydney

and Brisbane had front page pictures

and stories on Johnson, and

the announcement also made

page one headlines in Italy.

Mike d'Antoni, the Italian-American coach of a team in

Mila, said Johnson's "smile has

publicised basketball allover the

world."

"I can't believe it. This is

something which makes all other

things meaningless" d'Antoni

said.

The story also was big news in

places where basketball is less

popular, such as England and

this Scandinavian countries.

The *Today* Tabloid in London

had Two stories on Johnson's announcement,

while Oslo tabloid

*Dagblaet* had a half page on the

news under the headline: *"HIV*

*positive Magic -* USA is shock

over megastar's illness."

A spokesman for the International

Basketball federation,

(FIBA) congratulated Johnson

. for going public with his illness.

- AP