

A's News Clips, Wednesday, November 10, 2010

Poole: Glenn Burke's story says a lot about us

By Monte Poole, Oakland Tribune columnist 11/10/2010

It is impossible to have a cursory awareness of American history, of who we are as a nation, without coming to the realization that beneath our supposed love is a foundation of hate.

Despite lofty talk about togetherness and unity, the enduring truth is we victimize and stigmatize certain segments of society, usually based on such personal factors as sex, ethnicity, race, religion or sexual orientation.

Sport, where common cause trumps individual agendas, sometimes transcends this and bonds us all, explaining why Jackie Robinson and Billie Jean King and Yao Ming are not mere athletes but cultural icons cheered by broad, diverse fan bases.

Stories like that of Glenn Burke, however, remind us that even in sports we're all teammates until hate and intolerance intervene, saying we can't be teammates because we're not all alike.

The life and death of Burke, superbly told in "Out. The Glenn Burke Story," which premieres at the Castro Theatre in San Francisco tonight at 7:30 and will be shown on CSNBA at 8, places a mirror before us all. It forces us to inspect ourselves -- or at least it should.

Burke's modest goal was to achieve a peaceful coexistence between a baseball career and his homosexuality. He was denied because, as often is the case throughout our history, the fundamental definition of freedom was corrupted, this time by the politics of baseball's hierarchy.

A superbly talented two-sport star at Berkeley High 40 years ago, Burke eventually signed a baseball contract with the Los Angeles Dodgers. He was an immensely popular outfielder with incredible speed, power and a spectacular throwing arm. He conceivably was the organization's top prospect in the mid-'70s.

As a gay man, though, he was not spared victimization and stigmatization, much less that obstinate foundation of hate.

Sport is a subculture and baseball a subculture within, with its own language and customs, many of which don't stand up to reason. It's a tight society, largely conservative, with biases as rampant as testosterone. It's a den of homophobia.

Burke's quest was undone for several reasons, the predominant two being cowardly management and, to a lesser degree, ignorant teammates uncomfortable in his presence.

Dodgers executives, concerned about image, offered Burke \$75,000 to get married. To, you know, acquire a "beard." Their eyes opened to the truth, their response was not acceptance but the creation of a charade designed to conceal it. Burke basically laughed in their faces.

In a case of open discrimination, to the disapproval of many of his teammates, L.A. in 1978 traded Burke to the A's, who less than two years later hired Billy Martin to manage.

Martin's natural intensity, along with his seething homophobia, poisoned any chance of Burke making it in Oakland. Martin, whose heart was big enough to love some players like sons, inserted himself into our foundation of hate.

Hatred, along with its friend inequality, has given us centuries of slavery and lynchings and terrorism, along with false imprisonments and church bombings and denial of women's suffrage and assassinations of individuals seeking, of all things, peace.

Did you, by the way, miss those 20th-century photos posted in American shop windows saying "Help Wanted -- No Irish Need Apply" or "Jews Not Allowed"?

Isolated and anguished, Burke was in crisis when he reached the A's. Even in the late '70s, his lives could not be reconciled. The final shove from baseball, from his dreams, came when Martin arrived for spring training in 1980.

With extreme prejudice, Martin banished Burke, freeing the ballplayer from the intolerance and the mood swings that came with dwelling in his personal prison. He was out of the big leagues at 26, with 523 at-bats, before the first pitch of the '80 season.

Thus began the slow killing of his irrepressible spirit. He was 42 when he died of complications from AIDS in 1995.

Some folks, perhaps conditioned to deny truths and duck reality, get comfortable in a false life. They settle into the margins. Burke was not built for that. He yearned to be true to himself and others.

The day may come when we've evolved enough to bury our vilest subjective hatreds, when someone of uncommon courage, in a team sport, can acknowledge being gay without concern for retribution.

Welsh rugby legend Gareth Thomas came out of the closet last year conceding he otherwise might have carried out previous plans to commit suicide. The response in Europe has been mostly positive, putting a smile on Burke's spirit.

America's historical battlefield is strewn with the bodies of those cut tragically short by weapons loaded by intolerance. Glenn Burke is among them.

He was courageous, a hero. How long before society is mature enough to realize it?

New documentary details Glenn Burke's struggles as a gay athlete

Jorge Ortiz, USA Today, 11/10/2010

Baseball loves its streaks. Whether it be Joe DiMaggio's or Lou Gehrig's or Cal Ripken's, streaks have long been acclaimed and remembered, to the point some numbers are forever ingrained in fans' minds.

At the end of the new documentary about former Dodgers and A's outfielder Glenn Burke, a startling streak comes to light.

"Since Glenn Burke played his final game in 1979, 6,552 players have appeared in the major leagues," the screen reads. "Not one has come out as gay during his career."

That 31-year streak will not be celebrated, for it shows how difficult the climate has remained for a gay baseball player to be open about his sexuality. It's not just in baseball. To this day, no active athlete in a major team sport has ever acknowledged being homosexual.

The environment was even more hostile when Burke played in the majors from 1976-1979, and the documentary "Out. The Glenn Burke Story," which premieres tonight, skillfully details his struggle for acceptance and the demons he fought until dying of AIDS complications at age 42 in 1995.

The one-hour film, produced by Comcast SportsNet Bay Area, will be shown on that network at 8 p.m. Pacific Time and also be available outside Northern California to customers of DirecTV (Sports Pack Channel 696) and the Dish Network (Multi-Sports Package Channel 419).

Burke, a native of Oakland who starred as a basketball and baseball player at Berkeley High, is depicted by friends and former teammates – including Dusty Baker, Reggie Smith and Davey Lopes – as a gifted athlete with a radiant but sometimes erratic personality. Some even credit him with coming up with the high-five.

A scout rated Burke at the top of his scale for running ability, arm strength and raw power, and yet he never made much of a dent in the majors, batting .237 with two homers in 523 career at-bats.

Some of those interviewed believe Burke was run out of the game once his sexual orientation was discovered – "It was the kiss of death for a ballplayer," Smith said – first by the Dodgers management, which traded him to Oakland, and then by A's manager Billy Martin.

The documentary tells how in 1980, Martin's first season at the helm of the then-woebegone A's, the manager used a homosexual slur in introducing Burke to his new teammates in spring training.

Soon after, Burke left baseball and found solace in San Francisco's predominantly gay Castro district, where he was embraced as a celebrity, and he came out publicly in a 1982 Inside Sports story.

Eventually, Burke fell into a life of drug abuse, contracted HIV, spent time in prison and became homeless. The A's lent him a hand in his final months, but some of the people who knew him raised the question of how Burke's life and career would have unfolded if baseball had been more supportive.

It's a question that will go unanswered as, 31 years later, the streak continues.

Documentary examines struggle of gay baseball player Glenn Burke

Ann Killion, si.com, 11/10/2010

Don't ask. Don't tell.

It gets better.

Those are some of the phrases of the fall. The battle over "Don't ask, don't tell" -- the controversial clause for gays serving in the military -- rages on, a 16-year quagmire. The Itgetsbetter.com project was launched in September in the wake of a rash of suicides among gay youth who were bullied.

The struggle for gay civil rights continues in our society. In some institutions, such as the military, it's a loud battle.

In others institutions, it's not even a whisper. Like in men's professional team sports.

This week in San Francisco -- while World Series euphoria is still flowing in the streets -- baseball's darker side is being explored. A revealing documentary produced by the local Comcast affiliate -- *Out: the Glenn Burke Story* -- premieres Wednesday on both the cable sports channel and at the Castro Theater in San Francisco's iconic gay neighborhood, the Castro.

Glenn Burke was one of the great high school athletes to come out of the Bay Area in the 1970s. He was a top prospect for the Los Angeles Dodgers, a starter in the 1977 World Series, a player for his hometown Oakland A's.

And he was openly gay.

The documentary is a stark look at the last taboo in professional male team sports. Drugs? Gambling? Domestic abuse? Dog fighting? Almost anything can and has been forgiven.

WATCH A TRAILER OF OUT: THE GLENN BURKE STORY

But 33 years after Burke led an openly gay lifestyle on the L.A. Dodgers, no active player on a professional men's sports team has come out.

"I hope that at least we can provoke some discussion," said the film's executive producer Ted Griggs, who is also the general manager of Comcast SportsNet Bay Area.

Griggs grew up on the east side of the San Francisco Bay and heard about Burke's athletic prowess, as both a basketball and baseball star at Berkeley High. When Griggs played pickup basketball in East Bay playgrounds, he would hear players say, "that's a Glenn Burke move."

"The name kind of stuck in my head," Griggs said. "And when he passed away, I thought, that's a story I'd like to explore. And I stuck his obituary in a manila folder."

Griggs and his producers got Burke's former teammates to open up. Former Dodgers players like Dusty Baker, Reggie Smith and Davey Lopes make it clear on film that they knew exactly who Burke was. And while they were surprised and at times uncomfortable, their acceptance of him as a teammate comes across on film.

"You can tell they loved him," Griggs said. "There's a look in their eyes. A kind of pleading for understanding. That you don't know what it was like in 1977."

Burke's former teammates knew that his lifestyle was trouble.

"At that time period it was the kiss of death for a ballplayer," Smith says on camera.

Burke is portrayed as a mercurial personality, one who could light up a room or get in a fistfight. He was on the cultural cutting edge: his teammates credit him with inventing the high-five and for introducing them to a kind of spoken poetry he learned on the streets of Berkeley -- long before rap was mainstream.

Burke came up from the minors onto a supremely talented Dodgers team, with one of the most conservative organizations in baseball. The documentary details the Dodgers clumsy attempts to deal with Burke, including the story that the team offered him \$75,000 to get married. Burke's reply: "I guess you mean to a woman." The film also touches on rumors that Burke dated Tommy Lasorda's son, who later died of complications of AIDS. Tommy Lasorda, Jr. was estranged from his father, who publicly denied his son's homosexuality.

Griggs tried unsuccessfully to interview Lasorda for the documentary. But he was pleasantly surprised at how little resistance he found among Burke's former teammates.

"I was surprised how many of them were willing to talk and how much they loved him," Griggs said.

The phrase It Gets Better didn't apply to Burke. Seven months after starting the first game of the '77 World Series, he was traded to the Oakland A's for Billy North

"The Dodgers knew," Baker says in the documentary. "That's why they traded Glenn."

At that time the A's were baseball purgatory and Burke struggled. Billy Martin bated him with anti-gay slurs. Much of the clubhouse shunned him.

"The tension in the clubhouse was so thick you could cut it with a knife," Mike Norris says in the film.

Burke was sent to the minors despite the lack of talent on the A's major league roster. He eventually decided to quit baseball at 27

"They ran him straight out of the game," says A's teammate Shooty Babitt.

A few years later, Burke came out publicly to *Inside Sports* magazine and the *Today Show*. Though Bay Area baseball was a disaster for him, living in the Bay Area allowed him to be himself. He became a hero in the gay community, competing in the Gay Games.

But his life unraveled into high-risk behavior of drugs and crime. After being hit by a car, Burke's health declined. He was diagnosed with AIDS in 1994 and died a year later at 42.

Burke didn't adhere to baseball's own Don't ask, Don't tell code. Griggs said his mentality seemed to be, "I am what I am and if you don't like what I am, that's your problem."

But Burke wasn't accepted. Thirty years after Jackie Robinson broke baseball's color barrier Burke broke the gay barrier, living an out lifestyle in the major leagues. But in the 33 years since no one has followed in his footsteps.

We may think we're all more enlightened these days. But would anything be different for Glenn Burke now?