

Gay Athletes Slowly Enter the Endorsement Arena

Stuart Elliott



John Amaechi, a former professional basketball player who is openly gay, will soon start endorsing HeadBlade male grooming products.

For years, the number of athletes who were openly gay and had endorsement deals could have been counted on the hand of the old-time baseball player Mordecai Brown, known after a farm accident by the nickname Three Finger.

Recently, however, that has started to change, as Americans have reassessed their ideas about homosexuality and as athletes have become more willing to discuss their sexuality. In another sign of the times, a company that sells men's grooming products, HeadBlade, is to announce today that it is adding to its roster of endorsers John Amaechi, the former professional basketball player who said last month that he is gay.

Mr. Amaechi was a journeyman center for such teams as the Orlando Magic and Utah Jazz. He is the first National Basketball Association player to disclose his homosexuality. He also became the sixth retired male pro athlete to acknowledge it, joining Billy Bean, a baseball player, and Esera Tuaolo, a football player.

Mr. Amaechi "is the perfect storm," said Todd Greene, chief executive at the HeadBlade Company in Culver City, Calif., which specializes in products for bald men, because "he's African-American, a basketball player and gay, and those are all huge demographics for us."

"And he uses the product," Mr. Greene said, adding that he learned Mr. Amaechi was a "HeadBlader," as Mr. Greene calls his customers, while deciding whether Mr. Amaechi would make an effective spokesman.

"You want to do due diligence on who endorses your stuff," is how Mr. Greene described the research process. Other HeadBlade endorsers include the singer Chris Daughtry, who appeared on "American Idol"; Toney Freeman, a professional bodybuilder; and Howie Mandel, of NBC's "Deal or No Deal."

Mr. Greene declined to discuss how much the two-year deal would be worth to Mr. Amaechi, although he said it would include shares in HeadBlade, a private company with revenue that he estimated at under \$10 million.

In a twist, another company that makes men's grooming products, Bald Guyz, recently fired its first athletic endorser, the former pro basketball player Tim Hardaway, after Mr. Hardaway

attacked Mr. Amaechi and homosexuals in sports, declaring on a Florida radio show, "I hate gay people."

Howard Brauner, chief executive, said in a statement, "Bald Guyz, like baldness, does not discriminate based on lifestyle choice, color, education, financial resources, religion, physical capabilities or any other way."

In other words, the gay guy landed an endorsement contract after the straight guy lost his. What next, a Snickers commercial in which two men accidentally kiss and are completely cool about it?

Mr. Amaechi's endorsement deal "seems to indicate a bit of a turning point," said Michael Wilke, executive director at the Commercial Closet Association in New York, which tracks the representation of gay men and lesbians in marketing and maintains an online archive of advertising imagery (commercialcloset.org).

"Society, and sports fans, are becoming more used to gays," Mr. Wilke said, "and advertising is growing more comfortable with gays." Among the initial examples, Mr. Wilke cited a deal in 2000 in which Martina Navratilova began appearing in a general campaign for Subaru of America along with three other female athletes.

The campaign, by the agency now known as TM Advertising, part of the Interpublic Group of Companies, was her first appearance as a pitchwoman in national television ads. For decades, Ms. Navratilova had asserted that her openness about being a lesbian had cost her endorsements.

And in 2003, the Chili's restaurant chain featured Mr. Tuaolo in a TV commercial by GSD&M, part of the Omnicom Group, which came out a year after he did. The spot was aimed at mainstream audiences and identified him as "Esera, retired athlete."

The first ads featuring Mr. Amaechi for HeadBlade, being created internally, do not identify him as gay but carry a headline with an intriguing double meaning, "Against the grain."

The ads will run in two magazines for basketball fans, Hoop and Slam, and appear on the HeadBlade Web site (HeadBlade.com) and MySpace page (myspace.com/headblade). The ads are also planned for other magazines in which HeadBlade regularly advertises.

Mr. Amaechi, who is British, said he might make personal appearances for HeadBlade as the company expands into Europe. He spoke in a telephone interview from Washington, where he was on a book tour for "Man in the Middle," which he wrote with Chris Bull for ESPN Books.

"It's quite nice when you can say you use the product you endorse," Mr. Amaechi said. "I have to shave my head every two days. I would love to tell you it's a style thing, but I have a bald spot."

More seriously, Mr. Amaechi said that it was "good for young G.L.B.T. people," using the abbreviation for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered, "to see us not just in ads for drinks and H.I.V. medications but also in mainstream ads as well, because we are mainstream consumers."

There may have been "a small amount of karmic justice" in Mr. Hardaway's losing his endorsement deal, Mr. Amaechi said, "but I don't feel any joy."

Mr. Amaechi said he "would like to believe I would be eligible" to endorse bigger brands like Gatorade, McDonald's and Nike, known for hiring athletes for ads, but "I'm not going to hold my breath."

Mr. Wilke of Commercial Closet said that "the smaller and/or edgier brands tend to be the ones that step up and do something unusual" like signing openly gay athletes as endorsers. "A large

brand may perceive itself as having something to lose if controversy should happen," he added.

That aptly described what happened to Snickers, sold by the Masterfoods USA division of Mars, after it ran an ad during the Super Bowl. Gay activists complained about the spot, which showed two men who had accidentally kissed reacting by harming themselves. Masterfoods withdrew the commercial, created by the TBWA/Chiat/Day unit of Omnicom.

"The problem is that it was conditioning, modeling behavior," Mr. Amaechi said, by showing that "real men" were supposed to feel conflicted and horrified when two men kiss.

Asked if he would accept an offer to endorse Snickers, Mr. Amaechi replied: "I could show you how to react to two men kissing. Smile broadly."

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