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Gay and in N.B.A., but no longer silent

BASKETBALL

Suns president hopes that by coming out he can be mentor for others

BY DAN BARRY

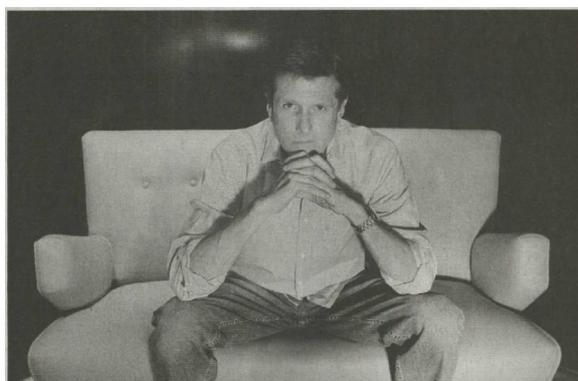
Last month, in a New York office adorned with sports memorabilia, two longtime friends met for a private talk. David Stern, commissioner of the National Basketball Association, sipped his morning coffee, expecting to be asked for career advice. Across from him sat Rick Welts, president and chief executive of the Phoenix Suns, who had come to New York not to discuss careers, but to say, finally, I am gay.

In many work environments, this would qualify as a so-what moment. But until now, Welts, 58, who has spent 40 years in sports, rising from ball boy to N.B.A. executive to team president, had not felt comfortable enough in his chosen field to be open about his sexuality. His eyes welling at times, he also said that he planned to go public.

By this point, Welts had already traveled to Seattle to share his news with another friend, Bill Russell, one of the greatest basketball players ever and the recent recipient of the Presidential Medal of Freedom. He had also met with Val Ackerman, the founding president of the Women's National Basketball Association, in New York, and would soon be lurching in Phoenix with Steve Nash, the point guard and leader of the Suns and twice the N.B.A. most valuable player. In these meetings and in interviews with The New York Times, Welts explained that he wants to pierce the silence that envelops the subject of homosexuality in men's team sports. He wants to be a mentor to gay people who harbor doubts about a sports career, whether on the court or in the front office. Most of all, he wants to feel whole, authentic.

"This is one of the last industries where the subject is off limits," said Welts, who stands now as a true rarity, a man prominently employed in professional men's team sports, willing to declare his homosexuality. "Nobody's comfortable in engaging in a conversation."

Stern did not find the discussion with Welts awkward or even surprising; he had long known that his friend was gay but never felt that he had license to broach the subject. Whatever I can do to help, the affably gruff commissioner



Rick Welts started in the N.B.A. while young, as a ball boy with the Seattle SuperSonics. JOSHUA LOTT FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

said. He sensed the decades of anguish that had led the very private Welts to go public.

After what needed to be said had been said, the two men headed for the door. And for the first time in their 30-year friendship, they hugged.

The very next day, the gifted Los Angeles Lakers forward Kobe Bryant, one of the faces of the N.B.A., responded to a technical foul by calling the referee a "faggot."

A FEELING OF ISOLATION

Rick Welts always knew.

Growing up in Seattle, he was the industrious kid who landed a coveted job with the SuperSonics basketball team, first as a ball boy, then as an assistant trainer.

After college, Welts returned to the Sonics as assistant director of public relations, a position that came with a desk but not an office. His diligent omnipresence, impressed the team's coach at the time, the intimidating Bill Russell. "Hey!" Russell would call. "White boy down the hall!"

And Welts would hustle up to do whatever was asked. The mutual respect that developed between the demanding basketball legend and the earnest employee gradually grew into a friendship close enough for Russell to judge him "a good teammate."

Immersed in a business where manhood is often defined by on-court toughness and off-court conquest, Welts rose to become the public relations director

for the Sonics, at a time when the team won its only championship, in 1979.

Welts was eventually recruited by Stern, then a rising star in the N.B.A.'s front office, to become the league's director of national promotions. Welts accepted. By this point, he had established a relationship with an architect he had met by chance in a Seattle restaurant in 1977. Soon Rick and Arnie became just another New York couple, enjoying the live-and-let-live anonymity of the big city.

At the same time, Welts helped to raise the N.B.A.'s profile and profits. In 1984, for example, he created the N.B.A. All-Star Weekend, just as Stern became the league's commissioner. And in 1997, he and Ackerman won accolades for their roles in establishing the W.N.B.A.

"In many ways, he had a complete understanding of the soul of the N.B.A.," said a grateful Stern. The N.B.A., though, did not have a complete understanding of Rick Welts.

Although he had opened up to his supportive parents and to his younger, only sibling, Nancy, Welts feared that if he made his homosexuality public, it would impede his rising sports career. "It wasn't talked about," he said. "It wasn't a comfortable subject. And it wasn't my imagination. I was there."

But this privacy came at great cost. In March 1994, his longtime partner, Arnie, died from complications related to AIDS, and Welts compartmentalized his grief, taking only a day or two off from work. His secretary explained to others that a good friend of his had died. Although she

and Arnie had talked many times over the years, she and her boss had never discussed who, exactly, Arnie was.

Around 7:30 on the morning after Arnie's death, Welts' home telephone rang. "It was Stern," he recalled. "And I totally lost it on the phone. You know, Uncle Dave. Comforting."

When Welts left the N.B.A. in 1999, he was the league's admired No. 3 man: executive vice president, chief marketing officer and president of N.B.A. Properties. By 2002, he was the president of the Suns who still kept his sexuality private.

But again Welts paid a price. Two years ago, a 14-year relationship ended badly, in part because his partner finally rejected the shadow life that Welts required.

He began to think: Here he was, in his mid-50s, and maybe he had sacrificed too much; and maybe he should open up about his sexuality, in a way that might help others. He had long talks with his widowed mother, Phyllis, in the months before she died of lung cancer, at 85, last autumn. She encouraged him to do what he thought was best.

'OF COURSE. ANYTHING.'

On an overcast spring morning in Seattle, Russell welcomed that white boy down the hall into his home, with Welts feeling as though he were about to slip another envelope under the door.

Welts said what he wanted to say and asked whether Russell, whose aversion to speaking with the news media is legendary, would agree to talk to a reporter for The Times, whose global edition is the International Herald Tribune. "Of course," Russell recalled saying. "Anything."

As Welts shook the massive right hand offered to him, he felt a rush of nervous relief. "I was really now on this journey," he said.

On the night that Kobe Bryant called the referee the slur, it forced Stern to once again to confront a culture in which the worst thing you can say about a man is to somehow suggest that he is less than a man.

Stern quickly issued a \$100,000 fine against Bryant, who has apologized. When asked weeks later about the persistent perception of the N.B.A. and other men's team sports as homophobic, Stern removed his glasses, rubbed his eyes and said, "I think we're going to get there."

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