

Johnson's return is Magic act

(AP) — First, there was euphoria — Magic Johnson returning to the NBA, a legend back in the lineup of the Los Angeles Lakers.

Now, there is reality — a basketball player battling a deadly disease, facing the grind of travel and games, his first-year coach juggling a roster that will be a player short for 20, perhaps 30 games.

This is not as pretty a picture as it may have seemed when Johnson announced his return on Tuesday after sitting out a season when he tested positive for the virus that causes AIDS.

"Everybody wants what's best for him and his family,"

said Al McGuire, a longtime NBA player and ex-coach. "But I'm wondering if in his mind's eye, he's looking at the All-Star Game and Olympics as being realistic. They were fluff games compared to what goes on in the NBA."

Johnson was MVP of last season's NBA All-Star Game and then co-captained America's gold medal basketball team in the Olympics at Barcelona.

"There is a false security because of the games he played," McGuire said. "But in those games, there was no undercutting, no banging, no bumping."

The idea is for Johnson to play between 50 and 60 games

and avoid back-to-back games. McGuire thinks the part-time plan will be fine in the beginning, but not in the end.

"I respect and admire everything the guy has done," he said. "But I can play half-court in the playground and there's a lot of moss on me. The NBA is a marathon, even part-time. It's not a 100-yard sprint."

Johnson's gung-ho spirit is something McGuire admires but not something he necessarily condones.

"Right now, it's like, 'Charge that machine gun nest!'" he said. "It scares me. I don't

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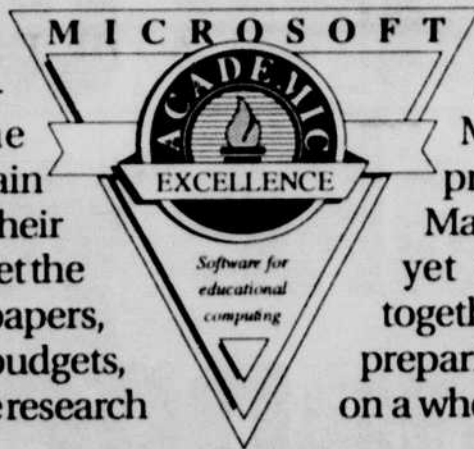
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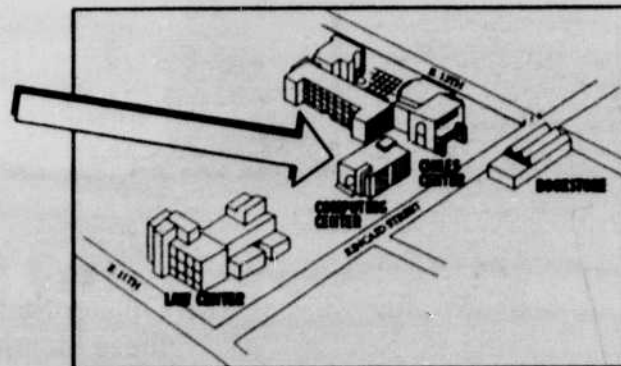


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