



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Renowned Chicago Athletes Support the Freedom to Marry in Illinois

*“Treating any group of people as second-class citizens hurts us all,”
sports stars Say*

CHICAGO – March 7, 2013 – As a decisive vote in the Illinois House of Representatives approaches, four celebrated Chicago athletes announced their support for extending the freedom to marry to gay and lesbian couples in Illinois. The sports stars voiced their support in an open letter urging lawmakers to approve the Religious Freedom and Marriage Fairness Act, proclaiming, “treating any group of people as second-class citizens hurts us all, because discrimination is wrong no matter whom the target is.”

“We come from a variety of backgrounds, and we have played different sports for different teams. But one thing that binds us together is our belief in the importance of fairness and respect – in all aspects of life,” the letter stated. “In Illinois today, gay and lesbian couples who are in lifetime committed relationships do not have the freedom to marry. This violates our sense of fairness and respect. It also goes against the Golden Rule of treating others as you would like to be treated yourself.”

The athletes signing the letter are:

- **Ernie Banks** – a beloved Chicago icon nicknamed “Mr. Cub,” Banks played as a shortstop and first baseman for the Chicago Cubs from 1953 through 1971. Banks was elected to the National Baseball Hall of Fame in 1977 and the Major League Baseball All-Century Team in 1999.
- **Richard Dent** – played defensive end for the Chicago Bears for eleven seasons. He was the MVP of legendary Super Bowl XX and was elected to the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 2011.
- **Hunter Hillenmeyer** – played linebacker for the Chicago Bears from 2003-2010. Along with All-Pro linebackers Brian Urlacher and Lance Briggs, Hillenmeyer was part of a linebacking corps considered one of the best in the league.
- **Brendon Ayanbadejo** – Having played for the Chicago Bears from 2005-2007, Ayanbadejo now plays linebacker for the Super Bowl XLVII champion Baltimore

Ravens. A three-time NFL Pro-Bowler, Ayanbadejo was born in Chicago and lived in the Lathrop Homes as a child.

The announcement from the sports stars comes at a time of strong support for marriage equality in Illinois; a recent *Crain's/Ipsos* poll shows Illinoisans supporting marriage equality, with 50 percent in favor and only 29 percent opposed. Of the 50 percent in support, 37 percent "strongly" support the freedom to marry, according to the poll.

"As professional athletes, we always played for the love of the game. The competition on the field – whether it was the football field or the baseball diamond – strengthened us and continues to do so," the athletes stated in the open letter. "But for that competition to take place, there have to be rules and a code of behavior. Above all, players have to treat each other with fairness and with respect."

The support also comes at a time where every major newspaper serving Illinois has endorsed the marriage equality bill, including the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Chicago Sun-Times*, the *Daily Herald*, the *Peoria Journal Star*, the *Springfield Journal-Register*, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* and the *Quad City Times*.

Illinois Unites for Marriage – a coalition led by Equality Illinois, Lambda Legal and the ACLU of Illinois – is continuing its statewide campaign in support of the bill, marshaling support and urging allies to step up contacts with their legislators as the House vote approaches. The coalition supporting the freedom to marry for all loving, committed couples – already strong with business, labor and community leaders, civic organizations, faith institutions and members of the clergy, African-American leaders, Republicans and Democrats – continues to grow.

A copy of the open letter is attached below this release. Information about the legislation is available at www.illinoisunites.org, along with information about how citizens can make their voices heard.

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An Open Letter from Athletes on Marriage Equality

As professional athletes, we always played for the love of the game. The competition on the field – whether it was the football field or the baseball diamond – strengthened us and continues to do so. But for that competition to take place, there have to be rules and a code of behavior. Above all, players have to treat each other with fairness and with respect. Doing so doesn't detract from the competition. It makes it better.

We come from a variety of backgrounds, and we have played different sports for different teams. But one thing that binds us together is our belief in the importance of fairness and respect – in all aspects of life.

In Illinois today, gay and lesbian couples who are in lifetime committed relationships do not have the freedom to marry. This violates our sense of fairness and respect. It also goes against the Golden Rule of treating others as you would like to be treated yourself.

In sports, any time a player is not treated with fairness and respect, the game is diminished. Similarly, treating any group of people as second-class citizens hurts us all, because discrimination is wrong no matter whom the target is.

For this reason, we believe that the Illinois General Assembly should act now and give same-sex couples the freedom to marry. It's the right thing for Illinois; it's the right thing to do, period.

Sincerely,

Ernie Banks, Shortstop, Chicago Cubs (retired)

Richard Dent, Defensive End, Chicago Bears (retired)

Hunter Hillenmeyer, Linebacker, Chicago Bears (retired)

Brendon Ayanbadejo, Linebacker, Baltimore Ravens (formerly with the Chicago Bears)