Renowned Sports Journalist Jim Trotter Files a Retaliation Lawsuit Against the NFL

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On September 12, 2023, renowned sports journalist Jim Trotter has filed a discrimination and retaliation lawsuit against the NFL and NFL Media. As described in the Complaint (read here), Mr. Trotter had been expressly told that there was no reason his contract—which was then set to expire at the end of March 2023—would not be extended. However, in February 2023, Mr. Trotter publicly challenged Commissioner Roger Goodell for failing to address systemic race discrimination in the NFL and in the NFL Media newsroom. In the following weeks, Mr. Trotter was asked to confirm whether he was "in alignment" with the NFL, and after he explained that he was not "in alignment" with the lack of diversity and inclusion, he was told that the NFL would not be renewing his contract and let him go. A more detailed timeline of Mr. Trotter's termination is set forth in the Complaint.

As set forth in the Complaint, the NFL has an extensive record of discriminatory and retaliatory conduct. The lawsuit describes the NFL's treatment of Mr. Trotter as just the latest in a long history of retaliation against anyone who stands up against the league on issues of racial injustice. Mr. Trotter repeatedly called out the NFL for refusing to address long-standing, institutional discrimination within the coaching ranks, the NFL league office and NFL Media newsroom. Mr. Trotter repeatedly voiced his concerns that the NFL Media newsroom did not have a single Black person in a managerial position, did not have a single Black copy editor and did not have a single full-time Black employee on the news desk—despite the league they were covering consisting of 60-70% Black players. Mr. Trotter even raised these concerns directly with Mr. Goodell. Yet Mr. Trotter's concerns consistently fell on deaf ears and nothing changed.

Mr. Trotter also observed a complete lack of concern within the NFL for discriminatory conduct by team owners. By way of example, in 2020, Mr. Trotter asked Jerry Jones, owner of the Dallas Cowboys, about the dearth of Black professionals in decision-making positions for NFL teams and he responded, "**If Blacks feel some kind of way, they should buy their own team and hire who they want to hire**." When Mr. Trotter reported this offensive remark to his managers, nothing was done. As another example, also in 2020, on a Zoom call with many members of NFL Media in attendance, a reporter conveyed that during a conversation with Terry Pegula, owner of the Buffalo Bills, about player protests against racial injustice, Mr. Pegula stated: "**If the Black players don't like it here, they should go back to Africa and see how bad it is**." Mr. Trotter raised complaints about this conduct and repeatedly followed up with his managers, but no remedial action was taken.

The above are just two examples demonstrating that the people at the very top of the NFL hierarchy (see here)—the team owners—can engage in discriminatory conduct without repercussion by the league office. As set forth in the Complaint, it is unfortunately not surprising that a league which condones race discrimination by team owners has had systemic and institutional problems with racial diversity and inclusion across the league. Through this lawsuit, Mr. Trotter seeks to hold the NFL accountable for its failure to live up to what it claims to be its core values.

Mr. Trotter is represented by Douglas H. Wigdor (Partner at Wigdor LLP) and David E. Gottlieb (Partner at Wigdor LLP).

Quotes Permitted for Publication:

Jim Trotter: "The NFL has claimed it wants to be held accountable regarding diversity, equity and inclusion. I tried to do so, and it cost me my job. I'm filing this lawsuit because I can't complain about things that are wrong if I'm unwilling to fight for what is right."

Jim Trotter: "I hope this lawsuit leads to real change across the league and in the newsroom. It is on the backs of a majority black player population that owners have made billions and those players deserve to have someone who shares their cultural and life experiences at the table when decisions are being made about how they are being covered."

Douglas H. Wigdor and David E. Gottlieb: "The NFL should be ashamed of the racial animus openly expressed by team owners and a complete lack of action by the league after being put on notice. The NFL and its owners have duty to the players, their employees and the public to stand up against racism. They continue to fail in this duty."

Douglas H. Wigdor and David E. Gottlieb: "Mr. Trotter's termination is consistent with the NFL's long record of retaliating against anyone who stands up against the league. Thankfully Mr. Trotter is not subject to any arbitration agreement for the NFL to try to hide behind, and the NFL will be held accountable in an open and public forum."

Any questions can be directed to Partner Douglas H. Wigdor (dwigdor@wigdorlaw.com), Partner David E. Gottlieb (dgottlieb@wigdorlaw.com) or Communications Manager Courtney Cormican (ccormican@wigdorlaw.com).

PRESS COVERAGE:

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