

Madison Square Garden Must Face Charles Oakley Lawsuit

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Chris Dolmetsch

Former New York Knicks forward Charles Oakley can proceed with assault claims against James Dolan's Madison Square Garden Co. over his forcible removal from the arena in February 2017, a federal appeals court in Manhattan said on Monday.

Oakley, a bruising power forward who played in the NBA for 19 years, had initially alleged his reputation was damaged by Dolan ordering his public ouster and blamed the Knicks owner for an alleged smear campaign afterward. The Knicks claimed at the time Oakley was behaving in an inappropriate and abusive manner. His lawsuit against Dolan, Madison Square Garden, MSG Networks Inc. and MSG Sports & Entertainment Inc. was thrown out in February 2019.

While the federal appellate panel declined to revive most of the suit's allegations, including the defamation claim, it ruled that Oakley can proceed with a case against MSG over his claim that unreasonable force was used to remove him. The court said the amount of force used by the security officers, who threw Oakley to the ground, might have been justified if they were arresting him but not merely to remove him from the property.

"We are pleased that the court dismissed the majority of the case and are confident that after a review of the facts, the remaining claims will also be dismissed," MSG spokeswoman Kimberly Kerns said in an email.

In a 2017 interview with The Undeclared, Oakley denied a team claim that he was directing insults toward Dolan or that he'd been behaving inappropriately. In his suit, Oakley says Dolan has "constantly disrespected" him in the years since he stopped playing and refused to make eye contact or shake his hand when they met. His ejection from MSG, which resulted in Oakley being charged with assault, played out live on television and led to a public battle between him and Dolan. The charges were later dropped.

"I am appreciative of the appeals court as I now have a chance to show the world what I said from day one was true," Oakley said in an emailed statement. "The truth is going to come out at trial and Dolan will be held responsible for what he did."

Oakley, 56, was with the Knicks from 1988 to 1998, earned a spot on the All-Star team in the 1993-94 season and helped lead them to the finals that year.

The case is Charles Oakley v. James Dolan, 17-cv-06903, U.S. District Court, Southern District of New York (Manhattan.)

