

N.F.L. Reporter Files Racial Discrimination Claim Against the League After Dismissal

Jim Trotter said his contract with the NFL Network was not renewed after he challenged Commissioner Roger Goodell and other executives on pro football's commitment to diversity.



By Ken Belson and Katherine Rosman

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Jim Trotter, a former reporter at the NFL Network, has sued the N.F.L. and the league-owned cable channel for racial discrimination, claiming that his contract was not renewed this year because he repeatedly spoke out about pro football's lack of diversity at the league office, among its coaches and within its media arm.

Trotter, now a columnist for The Athletic, a sports website owned by The New York Times Company, said in a 53-page complaint filed in federal court in Manhattan that he was let go in retaliation for, among other things, publicly challenging Commissioner Roger Goodell on the league's commitment to diversity.

"The N.F.L. has claimed it wants to be held accountable regarding diversity, equity and inclusion," Trotter said in a statement. "I tried to do so, and it cost me my job."

Trotter said he had previously raised concerns about discrimination in the N.F.L. before taking Goodell to task on national TV in February 2023. Included among his claims were what he believed were racist comments made to him by Dallas Cowboys owner Jerry Jones. The lawsuit also said that NFL Network officials didn't address concerns raised during a staff meeting about reports of another team owner's racist remarks, though Trotter pressed for a discussion.

In August 2020, the lawsuit claims, Trotter asked Jones about why there weren't more Black professionals in decision-making positions at N.F.L. teams. "If Blacks feel some kind of way, they should buy their own team and hire who they want to hire," Jones responded, according to the complaint.

The Cowboys did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Trotter said he wanted to mention Jones on air during his coverage of Jon Gruden in 2021, as racist emails written by the former Raiders coach came to light, because he felt there was a pattern of dismissiveness toward diversity. The lawsuit claims that two of Trotter's supervisors instructed him not to use Jones's comment.

"Mr. Trotter raised his concerns on numerous occasions about the N.F.L.'s record on racial diversity and discrimination, but the N.F.L. did nothing to legitimately investigate or address his concerns — even though offensive conduct was being committed by people at the very top of the N.F.L. hierarchy," the complaint said.

A league spokesman said in a statement: "We take his concerns seriously, but strongly dispute his specific allegations, particularly those made against his dedicated colleagues at NFL Media" and said their decision not to renew was driven by budget constraints.

Despite the disagreement, Trotter, who was employed by the NFL Network for five years, had expected to be offered a contract extension this spring. According to the complaint, Sandra Nunez, a vice president who oversees the NFL Network's on-air talent, told Trotter's agent last November that she "could not envision any reason why his contract would not be renewed" in March 2023, and asked if he wanted to expand his role.

But in February, just before the Super Bowl, Trotter asked Commissioner Goodell at a news conference about the league's commitment to diversity and why a Black person had never been hired as a senior manager in NFL Network's newsroom. The question was similar to one Trotter had asked Goodell at the previous season's Super Bowl news conference.

The next day, according to Trotter's complaint, his supervisor asked one of his colleagues: "Why does Jim keep bringing this up?"

At the beginning of March, Trotter claims Nunez asked if he was "in alignment" with the N.F.L., to which he replied that he was not in alignment with a newsroom without "Black representation in decision-making positions." On March 24, Nunez told Trotter's agent that Trotter's contract was not being renewed.

Trotter is seeking damages to be determined at trial and the appointment of a court-ordered monitor to investigate the league's "policies and practices in the hiring, retention and advancement of Black people throughout all levels of the N.F.L. organization and hierarchy."

The suit is the latest in a round of legal challenges that allege racial discrimination at the N.F.L. In 2019, former San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick received a multimillion dollar settlement after he claimed that N.F.L. teams systematically blackballed him because he knelt in protest of police brutality and social injustice during the playing of the national anthem.

Trotter is represented by the same law firm as Brian Flores, a Black and Hispanic assistant coach with the Minnesota Vikings who is suing the league and several teams for racially discriminating against him as he applied for head coaching jobs. A judge ruled in March that Flores's suit can proceed through the judicial system rather than being moved behind closed doors in private arbitration.

The league has for decades tried to increase the hiring of coaches of color and senior team executives, with mixed results. The Rooney Rule, which the league introduced in 2003 under threat of civil action, requires teams to include nonwhite candidates and women in interviews for open positions. Six of the league's 32 head coaches are people of color, up from four in 2020, but below the record of eight in 2018. The share of assistant coaches of color hit a record-high 42.9 percent in 2022, two percentage points more than in 2021.

The number of Black team presidents and general managers has also increased. Within the past three years, five teams hired Black presidents, and there are eight Black general managers, representing one-quarter of the league's teams. As recently as 2020, there were just two Black general managers. The first Black president of an N.F.L. team, Jason Wright of the Washington Commanders, was hired in 2020, and Sandra Douglass Morgan, president of the Las Vegas Raiders, in July 2022 became the first Black woman to hold the position.

Jenny Vrentas contributed reporting.

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