CHULA VISTA SPORTS WRITER CHALLENGES NFL  

BY JULIO RODRIGUEZ

A serious fight looms. Former San Diego Tribune journalist Jim Trotter is taking on the NFL. 

Chula Vista’s Trotter has filed a 53-page complaint in federal court against the NFL, alleging discriminatory and racist practices against people of color. He said he intends to shed light on practices that he had not seen before. He noticed the NFL’s leadership is overwhelmingly white. Though 55 percent of NFL players are black, its leadership is overwhelmingly white.

In August 2020 Trotter was taunted at the NFL’s annual Hall of Fame exhibition game by Dallas Cowboys owner Jerry Jones. Trotter was speaking to Cowboys Vice President of Player Personnel Will McClay about the lack of players being drafted from HBCUs and the lack of people of color in decision making positions.

Trotter notified his direct supervisor, Ali Bhanphuri, director of NFL Media, that he intended to discuss Jones on air. Bhanphuri then notified his boss, Todd Sperry.

Sperry directed Mr. Trotter via text to, “refrain from discussing Jerry Jones until you, me and Ali have had a chance to discuss. Ali and I were discussing and wondering if there’s any additional content around that quote?”

Trotter did not report on Mr. Jones’ quote, but he did not agree with the decision.

Shortly after the Gruden incident, an email was sent out companywide from the NFL HR department. It said the NFL takes its values seriously and that HR leadership is ready to support them. Nothing was done.

Trotter left ESPN to join the NFL Media team in 2018, under the condition that he could report on player activism. He said he was assured he could pursue what he wanted to cover.

After two years with the NFL, Trotter signed a three-year contract extension through March 2023. After signing the contract, Trotter began to notice things he had not seen before. He noticed the lack of black people in the NFL Media newsroom and in decision making positions. He began to make inquiries about the number of black people working in the NFL.

Data Trotter collected demonstrated that the NFL lacked diversity. Only two Black people worked as executive vice presidents. Total Black employees in league offices in New York, New York, and Los Angeles was just 8 percent.

John Maravel, his supervisor, agreed, but he and Trotter seemed to be in the minority. Maravel reminded Trotter that NFL Media reports to that league office. He urged his friend Trotter to tread lightly.

In June of 2021 Maravel was fired and replaced with Bhanphuri. Trotter and his boss let it be known that Bhanphuri directed Trotter not to report on racial issues in the NFL.

Trotter challenged NFL Executive Vice President Dasha Smith to hire a black manager for the news desk. Smith refused.

“Not again,” wrote. “You regularly make us aware of this. Hopefully you won’t have to ask any more in the next year.”

Two months later Smith asked Trotter if he was “in alignment” with the newsroom. Trotter said he was committed to his job, but not in alignment with newsroom racial policies.

“Oh, yeah, what I thought,” she replied. “That’s what I thought. You know it’s tough to go against corporate headwinds. Sometimes you have to compromise. Sometimes you have to pay the mortgage.”

Trotter’s contract was not renewed.

The NFL released a statement regarding Trotter’s lawsuit.

“We share Jim Trotter’s passion for quality journalism created and supported by a diverse and inclusive environment. We take his concern seriously but strongly dispute his specific allegations, particularly those made against his dedicated colleagues at NFL Media.”

Trotter awaits his day in court.