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# Professional Sports Have a Discipline Problem

Sam Bunn, Staff Reporter

In June of 2021, damning allegations surfaced regarding star Los Angeles Dodgers pitcher Trevor Bauer. Bauer, who is accused of sexual battery by a San Diego woman, was suspended for 324 games (the equivalent of two MLB seasons) by commissioner Rob Manfred at the end of April.

Contrast this with the case of Marcell Ozuna, an outfielder for the Atlanta Braves. Ozuna was charged with felony aggravated assault by strangulation in March of 2021 after he choked his wife and threw her against a wall. Manfred elected to retroactively suspend Ozuna for just 20 games, meaning that he was free to start on Opening Day for his team.

The point of this piece is not to determine specifically if Bauer or Ozuna are guilty of the crimes they are accused of. It is to highlight the discrepancies in the response of the MLB towards players who have violated the league's code of conduct. In a world where commissioners hold immense power in dictating the severity of sanctions, the result is oftentimes a seemingly random distribution of fines, suspensions and punishments.

This isn't fair to victims, players or teams. It gives no advantage to the league to have such a wishy-washy disciplinary policy. Relying on one man to hand out punishments based on arbitrary judgment is how you end up with Ozuna banned for 300 fewer games than Bauer.

Commissioners playing God is how we've found pitcher Jenrry Mejia and third baseman Alex Rodriguez banished from entering the MLB Hall of Fame for the use of performance-enhancing drugs (PEDs), while players such as Aroldis Chapman (choked his wife before grabbing a gun and firing eight shots in their home) and Jose Reyes (threw his wife through a sliding glass door and sent her to the emergency room) receive slaps on the wrist in comparison. This is the same world where all-time MLB hit leader Pete Rose is permanently banned from baseball and ineligible for the MLB Hall of Fame for gambling, but Omar Vizquel is still on ballots despite domestic violence and sexual harassment incidents (one involving a disabled batboy) following him throughout his career.

This is beyond ridiculous. Whatever you may think is the appropriate punishment for Manfred to hand down to each individual violator, it's impossible to justify the way that sanctions have been laid out so far.

The impact of these decisions stretches further than the MLB. Other leagues have the same issues and often look to one another for guidance on how to handle sanctions against players who violate the league code of conduct, especially when the justice system does not elect to pursue a case. How the MLB handles the allegations against Bauer will determine how other leagues with pending cases impose sanctions on their players.



The elephant in the room of course is Deshaun Watson. Watson was drafted by a struggling Houston, Texas team in 2017 and immediately became a superstar. He made the Pro Bowl in each of his first three seasons starting and led the league in passing yards in 2020. Watson was beloved by the city of Houston and poised to be the face of the National Football League for the next decade.

Now, Watson is facing a civil lawsuit after 22 women have accused him of sexual misconduct. The plaintiffs, mostly massage therapists, allege that Watson sexually harassed or assaulted them during professional appointments.

When predatorily sexual patterns have surfaced in the past, the NFL has been content to issue minor suspensions. First overall draft pick Jameis Winston was accused of rape (in 2013) and groping an Uber driver (in 2017), for which he was suspended for three games. Now-retired quarterback Ben Roethlisberger was faced with several credible sexual assault accusations throughout his career for the Pittsburgh Steelers, but was suspended only once, for four games. New York Jets wide receiver Santonio Holmes was suspended for the same number of games for smoking marijuana during his days off.

That is indefensibly wrong. Players are suspended the same number of games for recreational drug use in their free time as they are for some of the most horrific, imaginable criminal offenses.

Professional sports need something to change. A disciplinary system where commissioners are free to do whatever they like is not just or fair. The players, owners and fans all benefit from a clear, thorough policy that lays out specific sanctions that policy violations will incur. I hope that the enormous pending cases in the MLB and the NFL will move us towards something of that sort.

Everybody deserves better.