

NFL to seek at least one-year ban of Deshaun Watson at Tuesday hearing

By Mark Maske

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The NFL is poised to argue for an indefinite suspension of at least one year for Cleveland Browns quarterback Deshaun Watson at a hearing scheduled to begin Tuesday in front of the sport's new disciplinary officer, according to a person familiar with the case.

The league will contend that Watson, who was accused of sexual misconduct in two dozen civil lawsuits filed by women, violated the NFL's personal conduct policy and should be suspended without pay for at least the entirety of the 2022 season, that person said. Watson would have to apply for reinstatement under the league's proposed penalty.

The NFL Players Association is expected to argue to former U.S. district judge Sue L. Robinson, the disciplinary officer jointly appointed by the league and the NFLPA, for far less severe discipline against Watson, perhaps seeking no suspension at all.

Robinson will make the initial disciplinary ruling, under the revised personal conduct policy put in place with the collective bargaining agreement completed in 2020.

If Robinson rules that Watson violated the conduct policy and imposes disciplinary measures, the league or the union could appeal the penalty to NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell or a person designated by him. If Robinson rules that Watson did not violate the policy, the case would be closed, with no possibility of an appeal.

Under the previous version of the conduct policy, Goodell was empowered to both make the initial disciplinary ruling and resolve any appeal. This is the first case under the new system.

It's not clear how long the hearing will last or when Robinson will make an initial ruling. The NFL aims to have the entire case, including the resolution of any appeal, resolved before training camp, a person with knowledge of the matter previously said. The Browns, who completed a trade with the Houston Texans for Watson this offseason, have their first full practice involving veteran players scheduled for July 27.

Watson has not been charged with a crime and has denied the allegations against him. He reached settlements in 20 of the 24 then-active civil lawsuits filed against him, according to Tony Buzbee, the attorney representing the women. Buzbee said when he announced the settlements that the terms would remain confidential. He said he expected the four remaining lawsuits to be resolved in court.

The NFL said when the civil settlements were announced that they would have “no impact” on the league’s disciplinary process. The personal conduct policy allows for disciplinary measures to be imposed without criminal charges.

The league’s plan to seek a suspension of at least a year does not come as a surprise to those defending Watson in the case. Multiple people familiar with the case said a week ago that the NFL would seek a “significant” suspension of Watson. A person on Watson’s side of the case said then that the league “probably” would argue for a suspension of one full season.

The NFLPA is expected to cite, among other issues, the NFL’s decision not to suspend owners Daniel Snyder of the Washington Commanders, Robert Kraft of the New England Patriots and Jerry Jones of the Dallas Cowboys for incidents involving them and their teams.

Watson has a base salary of \$1.035 million for the 2022 season as part of the five-year contract he signed with the Browns worth a guaranteed \$230 million. He would lose that salary if he’s suspended for the entire season, and it’s possible that the NFL could seek to impose an additional fine.

Watson did not play last season; the Texans placed him on their game-day inactive list on a weekly basis. But he was not suspended and was paid his entire salary.