

FANTASY COURT

SYLLABUS

NEW DADS *v.* COMMISSIONER

Petition for declaratory judgment regarding the Commissioner’s refusal to enable the auto-sub feature

No. 26-1535-1. Heard and decided October 7, 2026

The Ringer Fantasy Football Show, “Quarter-Season Awards: Power Ranking the Best and Worst Fantasy Draft Picks, ‘MNF’ Recap, and the World’s Biggest Imagine Dragons Fan,” at 1:11:03–1:16:45

Three members of Petitioner Jeff’s league became fathers this year and requested that the Commissioner enable Sleeper’s auto-sub feature, which permits a manager to pre-designate a bench player to enter the starting lineup should a questionable starter be ruled inactive. The Commissioner, who is single, refused, characterizing the request as a lack of dedication and noting that he personally sets phone alerts for NFL insiders and alarms for lineup deadlines. The new fathers responded that if the Commissioner ever found a partner, he would understand that there are other things in life besides fantasy football; the Commissioner replied that there are not. The dispute has persisted all season, and Petitioner, a self-described neutral observer, notes that no specific player is at issue—the aggrieved members are simply upset that a significant quality-of-life improvement is being withheld. Petitioner seeks the Court’s official stance on the auto-sub feature.

Held: A platform’s auto-sub feature is consistent with the essential character of fantasy football so long as the manager himself designates the substitute in advance, and a Commissioner may not withhold it on the ground that his league mates are insufficiently dedicated.

We held that the essence of fantasy football is living and dying with one’s own choices, and that a pre-designated substitution preserves that essence because the manager, not the platform, picks the player. Auto-sub is the codified descendant of the group-chat backup designations we upheld in *Josh v. Commissioner* and the digital form of the proxy lineup change leagues have always honored. The Commissioner’s

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“dedication” objection misreads *Isaac v. Commissioner*, which charges managers with watching their phones but has never forbidden a league from adopting a tool that makes the watching unnecessary. Because league settings belong to the league and not to the Commissioner’s personal philosophy of life, the pre-lock variant may be enabled now; the variant that credits a substitute who has already played is reserved for each league to decide before the season.

CHIEF JUSTICE HEIFETZ delivered the opinion of the Court, in which JUSTICE HORLBECK joined. JUSTICE KELLY filed an opinion concurring in the judgment.

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Three members of Petitioner Jeff's league became fathers this year. They asked the Commissioner to enable Sleeper's auto-sub feature, which lets a manager name, in advance, the bench player who will enter his lineup if a questionable starter is ruled out. The Commissioner, who is single and sets phone alerts for NFL insiders and alarms for lineup deadlines, refused, calling the request a lack of dedication. The fathers replied that if the Commissioner ever found a partner he would understand that there are other things in life besides fantasy football. The Commissioner replied that there are not. The dispute has run all season.

Petitioner describes himself as a neutral observer and concedes that no particular player is at stake; the fathers are simply angry that a significant improvement to their lives is being withheld by a man with Adam Schefter on push notification. He asks whether this Court has an official stance on auto-sub.

It does. A pre-designated substitution is consistent with the essential character of fantasy football, because the manager still makes the choice and still lives with it. And a Commissioner may not withhold the feature on the ground that his league mates are insufficiently dedicated. Dedication is a virtue. It is not a league setting.

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I

A preliminary matter. Petitioner is neutral and no player is at issue, so the Commissioner might call this a request for an advisory opinion. It is not. Three managers want a setting enabled, the one man with the password will not enable it, and they have been fighting since September. That is a live controversy; the absence of an aggrieved lineup goes to damages, not ripeness. Cf. *Aetna Life Insurance Co. v. Haworth*, 300 U.S. 227 (1937) (declaratory relief lies where the dispute is definite and concrete). In *Isaac v. Commissioner*, 24-0858-1 (2024), we held that “Hypothetical children confer no relief.” These children are real. We proceed.

Sleeper offers two versions of the feature. Under the first, the substitute enters only if the starter is ruled out before the substitute’s own game locks: the manager with Mike Evans at 4:25 Eastern and a christening at 4:25 Eastern names his replacement on Saturday and goes to the christening. Under the second, the substitute may enter even if his game has already been played. The petition does not distinguish between them. We do, in Part III.

II

Fantasy football is not a contest of availability. It is a contest of judgment: who to draft, who to start, which beat reporter to believe. The essence of the game is living and dying with the choices you make. That principle is the measure of any automated feature: a tool is consistent with fantasy football if the manager makes the decision and the tool merely carries it out, and inconsistent if the tool decides for him.

Pre-designated auto-sub falls on the right side of that line. The manager picks the player. If Evans sits and the substitute posts three catches for nineteen yards while the receiver left on the bench scores twice, that is the manager’s fault. The platform has not thought for him. It has waited for him. What the feature removes is not judgment but vigil, and vigil was never the point. A feature that inserted the highest-projected bench player on its own would be different, because the choice would belong to the algorithm, and we take no stance on it.

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Nor is this new. Auto-sub has a common-law ancestor, and this Court decided it. In *Josh v. Commissioner*, 20-1341-1 (2020), a league coping with pandemic scheduling chaos let managers announce a backup in the group chat “in case their game gets canceled or whatever,” and we upheld a manager who “properly designated his backup in advance through the prescribed procedure.” *Josh*, 20-1341-1. Those designations were an honor system, policed by whoever was reading the chat. The pandemic receded; the practice did not. The honor system became a drop-down menu. Sleeper did not invent auto-sub. It codified *Josh*. A Court that blessed the handwritten version in 2020 cannot condemn the printed one in 2026.

JUSTICE HORLBECK supplied the other half of the lineage at argument. Every league has always let a manager who will be without internet deputize a friend: the friend sees that Evans is out and tells the Commissioner that Devaughn Vele goes in on Craig’s behalf. No one has ever called that cheating; it is the kind of alternative means a diligent manager is expected to arrange. See *Mitch v. League Member*, 24-0850-1 (2024). Auto-sub is the digital version of the deputized friend, with two improvements: it cannot forget, and it cannot be the Commissioner’s semifinal opponent.

III

The Commissioner’s objection is that a manager who cannot check his lineup before kickoff lacks dedication, and he can cite us for it. In *Isaac* we charged every manager with “constructive notice of any injury designation published through channels reasonably available to him before kickoff,” and, told that this meant everyone should be on their phones more, we agreed: “No one is on their phone enough.” *Isaac*, 24-0858-1.

The Commissioner reads those lines as a philosophy. They were a holding, and a narrow one. *Isaac* decided what a manager may demand after the fact when he had his phone and did not look. It said nothing about what a league may build in advance so that looking is unnecessary. Auto-sub discharges the duty of vigilance rather than evading it: the manager looked on Saturday, decided, and recorded the decision where the platform could find it. That is more diligence than *Isaac* required,

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not less. Nor do our paternity cases ask fathers to refresh injury reports in the delivery room. “Fantasy football should enhance life, not diminish it by demanding attention during life’s most significant moments.” *In re Fantasy Paternity Leave*, 21-1238-1 (2021). *Paternity Leave* even anticipated the solution, observing that managers in demanding leagues “might designate a trusted friend with login credentials.” The trusted friend now ships with the app.

That leaves who decides. The Commissioner controls the settings page, but the rules are the league’s. “Fantasy football leagues are not autocracies. Commissioners are not dictators.” *Andrew v. Commissioner*, 24-0826-1 (2024). A Commissioner who refuses a setting because it would help him or hurt a rival abuses his office. A Commissioner who refuses it because he has concluded that there is nothing in life besides fantasy football has not abused his office so much as mistaken it. He administers a league, not a creed. The decision belongs to the members, and they may make it now: enabling the pre-lock variant mid-season is prospective, applies to every team on identical terms, and, as Petitioner candidly reports, decides no matchup. The second variant moves points backward in time, and JUSTICE KELLY’s discomfort with it is shared by at least one member of this majority. We take no stance on it; leagues should decide it for themselves, before the season.

* * *

We close by noting what the Commissioner has right. His dedication is real, and this Court has never said a word against a man who treats Sunday as a liturgy. Justice Horlbeck expressed at argument a respect for the single, jaded commissioner that the Court shares. He also proposed that the league find the Commissioner a partner, so that he too might have something to complain about. We do not order that remedy, but the league has every incentive to pursue it.

The Court’s official stance is that pre-designated auto-sub is fantasy football, played by people who have somewhere else to be at 4:25. The Commissioner may not withhold it as a test of devotion. The league should vote, and the fathers should name their substitutes.

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Declaratory relief granted.

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JUSTICE KELLY, concurring in the judgment.

I agree that the Commissioner's reason is not a reason, and that the league, not the Commissioner, decides what its settings are. I do not join the Court's "official stance," because I do not think this Court should have one, and because my own view of the feature is less settled than the Court's.

I have never played in a league that uses auto-sub, so I come to it as a stranger. My first impression is that it takes away some of the point. Setting a lineup is the job, and checking it at 12:50 on a Sunday with a questionable receiver and a decision to make is the part of the week that feels like managing a team rather than owning one. The Court says the feature removes only the vigil and not the judgment. Perhaps. But the vigil is where a good deal of the judgment happens, and a league that automates it has changed the game a little, whether or not for the worse.

I would also say plainly what the Court says gently. The second variant, under which a player who finished at 4:00 on Sunday is credited to a lineup whose starter was scratched at 7:30 on Monday, lets a manager collect points for a decision he never had to make with the information everyone else had. That is not the digital version of a friend texting the Commissioner. It is the digital version of a friend texting the Commissioner after the game. The Court reserves the question. I would answer it: a league that wants that rule should adopt it with its eyes open, and I would not adopt it in mine.

KELLY, J., concurring in the judgment

What follows is a procedural rule, not a substantive one. Auto-sub, in either form, is a league-to-league decision, and it should be made before the season, when no one knows whose receiver will be questionable in Week 9. This league did not make it, and has been arguing instead. I have written before that the answer to a league mate who holds the league hostage is to let him make good on the threat. *In re Rishawn Holmes Accidental Drop Controversy*, 21-1246-1 (2021). The Commissioner has held the settings page hostage to his private theory of the good life. The league should take a vote, and he should enter the result. I would leave the Court's stance out of it, and I concur in the judgment.