

FANTASY COURT

SYLLABUS

CHARLIE v. EASY MARK UNCLE

Petition by League Commissioner for advisory opinion on whether to void a trade and impose sanctions, following informal demands by league members at a family wedding

No. 26-1539-1. Heard and decided October 14, 2026

The Ringer Fantasy Football Show, “Bills-Rams Game of the Year, Power Ranking 9 Players Who Made the Leap, Fantasy Court, HBD Jerry Jones, and Introducing “Pelicaning”,” at 1:06:23–1:14:47

Petitioner Charlie serves as Commissioner of a twelve-team family league in its inaugural season, comprising a mix of experienced fantasy players and first-timers, with no entry fee or prize money. One uncle, a first-time player (referred to herein as “Easy Mark Uncle” or “Mark”), was roundly roasted for a poor draft and reached a breaking point during a family wedding weekend at which nearly every league member was in attendance. After a different uncle jokingly offered to trade Jaxon Smith-Njigba to Mark for \$10,000, Mark concluded that trades could be had for the right price and persuaded his nineteen-year-old son to send him Jonathan Taylor and Nico Collins in exchange for Saquon Barkley, Darius Cooper, and a set of custom-fit golf clubs. League members at the wedding demanded that Petitioner ban Mark from the league and block the trade. Petitioner, who concedes he egged on the conversation and underestimated his young cousin’s negotiating skills, is generally disinclined to veto trades, but regards the payment of golf clubs for players as “complete loser behavior.” When Petitioner asked Mark whether the best way to earn respect was to cheat, Mark answered “yes.” Petitioner, who is also weighing an “Anyone But Mark” alliance, seeks guidance on how to proceed.

Held: A trade in which real-world goods pass as consideration for fantasy players is bribery, not a trade, and a commissioner must reject it even in a league with no money on the line. The trade is voided, but the uncle stays.

Syllabus

We distinguished the managerial-autonomy principle of *James v. League* and *Dakota v. League*, which forbids vetoes based on lopsided value, from the closed-system principle of *Commissioner v. Danny*, which forbids introducing material consideration from outside the fantasy football system. A set of custom-fit golf clubs is external consideration no matter how well the son negotiated, and the absence of an entry fee does not change the analysis, because the trade itself is for money even if the league is not. We declined to expel the uncle, whose candor about cheating as a path to respect is a cultural problem for the family rather than a jurisdictional one for the Court.

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

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

Petitioner Charlie is Commissioner of a twelve-team family league in its first season. There is no entry fee and no prize. One uncle, playing fantasy football for the first time, drafted poorly and was told so, repeatedly, by his relatives. The record calls him the Easy Mark Uncle; we will call him Mark. At a family wedding attended by nearly the whole league, the roasting continued until a second uncle offered, as a joke, to trade Mark Jaxon Smith-Njigba for \$10,000. Mark did not hear a joke. He heard a price list.

Over the wedding weekend, Mark persuaded his nineteen-year-old son to send him Jonathan Taylor and Nico Collins for Saquon Barkley, Darius Cooper, and a set of custom-fit golf clubs. Members demanded at the reception that Petitioner block the trade and expel Mark. Petitioner, who concedes he egged the conversation on and underestimated his young cousin at the bargaining table, is generally disinclined to veto trades but regards paying golf clubs for players as “complete loser behavior.” When he asked Mark whether the best way to earn respect was to cheat, Mark said yes.

We hold that the trade must be rejected. A veto is the wrong tool for a bad trade, but this is not a bad trade. It is a purchase, and the league’s

Opinion of the Court

rosters are not for sale. We decline, however, to expel Mark, and we decline Petitioner's invitation to organize an alliance against him.

I

Petitioner begins with this Court's hostility to the trade veto, and he has read us correctly. In *James v. League*, 24-0846-2 (2024), we held that "it is not your job to manage other people's teams," and that "Trade vetoes exist to prevent collusion and bad faith dealing, not to enforce collective judgments about fair value." In *Dakota v. League*, 25-0717-3 (2025), we refused to let a league behave as "a fantasy football homeowners' association." If the complaint here were that Mark fleeced his son, or the reverse, Petitioner would be right to stand aside. Taylor and Collins for Barkley and Cooper is a trade two adults may make, and we would not disturb it because the wedding guests thought it stupid.

But the autonomy principle has always carried its own limit, stated in the same breath. *James* preserved the veto for "collusion, concealed terms, or bad faith dealing." The question is whether a set of golf clubs belongs on that list. It does, and it has for five seasons.

II

In *Commissioner v. Danny*, 21-1234-1 (2021), a manager offered to buy beer for anyone who would claim a waiver-wire defense to block his rival. We held that the beer, and only the beer, was the violation. Urging league mates to make claims was gamesmanship; hoarding three defenses was unsavory but legal. The beer was different because "Fantasy football operates as a closed competitive system where managers make decisions based on factors internal to the competition." Once a manager "introduced material compensation outside the fantasy football system to induce roster moves," we said, "This is collusion in its purest form."

Last season we applied the other side of that line. In *Steve v. Pat*, 25-1427-1 (2025), two dynasty managers wagered draft picks on a round of golf, and we ordered the transfer honored because the consideration stayed inside the system: "No cars were exchanged. No external monetary consideration changed hands." We also said what would have been

Opinion of the Court

different: “A manager who trades a first-round pick for a car is not making a football decision; he is conducting a commercial transaction using league assets as currency.” That sentence was written about a hypothetical. Mark has supplied the facts. Golf was incidental to *Steve*; here it is the consideration.

Justice Kelly put it most directly at argument: this is not collusion but corruption. We agree, and the label matters. Collusion describes two managers coordinating inside the game to the detriment of a third. Bribery describes value entering the game from outside it. The son was not sacrificing his season for his father; by every account he negotiated well. That is exactly the problem. A trade in which one side is paid in real goods cannot be evaluated on football terms. Jonathan Taylor is worth more than Saquon Barkley this season, or he is not; a set of Callaways does not help answer the question. It replaces it.

Petitioner says nothing is on the line: no entry fee, no pot, nothing worth a family fight. We accept the premise and reject the inference. The league is not for money, but the trade is. The absence of a prize does not make rosters a free-market commodity; it makes the standings the only thing anyone can win, which is precisely what Mark has tried to buy. Petitioner adds that the counterparty is Mark’s own son. We have been solicitous of family leagues. In *Jack v. The In-Laws*, 25-1411-1 (2025), we let a suspicious 5:00 AM spousal trade stand because voiding it “would poison the holiday season,” and told the petitioner, “Sometimes you swallow one.” But *Jack* turned on who was complaining: an uninvolved champion, in a league where the families were not close. Here the whole league objected, together, at the wedding, and the one person asking us to let it go is the Commissioner. There is nothing left to poison. The holidays will be hilarious either way.

Then there is what comes next. If the Commissioner processes this trade, he has announced a rule, and the rule is that rosters have a cash price. Watches change hands at Thanksgiving dinner for Chase Brown. The uncle who joked about \$10,000 for Smith-Njigba is holding an open offer. Justice Kelly asked whether the league wishes to become baseball,

Opinion of the Court

where the richest team wins. We put the question to the family: do you want Mark to be the Dodgers? He has shown he is willing.

III

The trade is voided. Taylor and Collins return to the son; Barkley and Cooper return to Mark. The golf clubs are a matter between father and son, and we express no view on whether a nineteen-year-old who has already been fitted must give them back. Petitioner also asks whether he should instead have required more expensive clubs. No. The remedy for a bribe is not a larger bribe.

As to expulsion, we decline. Mark is four weeks into his first season and just learned to open the game logs. His offense was not concealment, which is what made *League v. Snake*, 20-1331-1 (2020) a case about championship legitimacy; he did this in front of everyone and was proud of it. A man who answers “yes” when asked whether cheating is the way to be respected has not misunderstood the rule. He has misunderstood respect, and that is a project for his family rather than for this Court. Nor do we endorse the “Anyone But Mark” alliance. Petitioner suspects it is not the mature answer, and he is right. With the trade undone, Mark’s roster will do the work an alliance was meant to do.

One last word. A league that would rather live under Mark’s rules may adopt them. See *In re Pink Slips Fraud in the League of No Integrity*, 24-0822-1 (2024) (“League names have meaning.”). If this family votes before next season that everything goes, we will enforce that too. What it may not do is discover the rule midseason, at a wedding, because one uncle heard a joke and reached for his wallet.

Trade voided. Expulsion denied.

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CHIEF JUSTICE HEIFETZ, concurring.

I join the Court’s opinion in full. The trade cannot stand, and the Court is right that Mark should remain in the league to lose the honest way. I write separately to say two things the Court leaves implicit.

First, the vice is not that Mark spent money. It is that he spent it on one person. The question I asked at argument is the one future commissioners should ask: did you bring enough for the whole class? A manager who buys every member of his league a golf club, or a round, or dinner, has purchased nothing from anyone; he has subsidized the league and bought himself only goodwill, which remains the sole legal currency in fantasy football. The closed-system rule of *Commissioner v. Danny*, 21-1234-1, is offended by selective inducement, not by generosity. I would hold that side consideration offered equally to every member of a league is not a bribe. Mark may buy twelve putters. He may not buy one son.

Second, the remedy going forward. In *Steve v. Pat*, 25-1427-1, I wrote that questions of this kind should be “made collectively, not imposed by two managers who decided over nine holes that draft picks make excellent wager stakes.” That is this case with the golf moved from the course to the pro shop. The Court says the family may vote to become a League of No Integrity. I would tell Petitioner to hold the vote. A league in which one member openly believes cheating is the route to respect will confront this question again, and it should decide once, before the draft,

HEIFETZ, C. J., concurring

rather than at the next wedding. I confess I am rooting for a particular outcome. A man willing to spend a thousand dollars on custom-fit irons to win a league with no prize is not a problem fantasy football has had very often, and I am not certain it is one we should hurry to cure.