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Court Clears OSU's Puff Johnson to Play: Ohio Judge Restores Final Season of Eligibility

COLUMBUS, OH — The Franklin County Court of Common Pleas has granted a Preliminary Injunction in favor of Ohio State men's basketball player Donovan "Puff" Johnson, ordering the NCAA to immediately extend his eligibility for the 2025–2026 season while the case proceeds. The Shumaker Law Firm represented Johnson in this successful action.

"This decision represents a significant moment not only for Puff but for the continued evolution of college athletics," said Shumaker Partner Nicholas Stack. "The Court recognized that eligibility rules cannot be applied in a vacuum, particularly where medical misdiagnosis and premature return-to-play decisions directly deprived an athlete of a season."

The ruling expands upon a previously issued Temporary Restraining Order and reflects the Court's determination that Johnson demonstrated a substantial likelihood of success on the merits of his claims, including that the NCAA's enforcement of certain eligibility rules likely violates Ohio's Valentine Act.

In its February 20, 2026 Decision and Entry, the Court found that the NCAA's application of its Five-Year Rule and denial of Johnson's Medical Hardship Waiver likely imposed an unreasonable restraint of trade in the Division I men's basketball labor market. The Court further concluded that denying Johnson the opportunity to compete would cause irreparable harm, including the permanent loss of his final collegiate season, diminished development and exposure opportunities, and significant NIL-related losses that could not be remedied through monetary damages.

Johnson's claim arises from the 2024–2025 season, during which he suffered a wrist injury that was misdiagnosed, left untreated, and prematurely cleared. Those medical failures culminated in a season-ending injury in January 2025. Although Johnson sought a Medical Hardship Waiver to preserve the lost season, the NCAA denied the request and applied its Five-Year Rule, which limits the total time an athlete may compete.

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Under the Court's Order, the NCAA is preliminarily barred from enforcing the Five-Year Rule against Johnson for the 2025–2026 season, enforcing its denial of his Medical Hardship Waiver, threatening or imposing any sanctions against Johnson or The Ohio State University for his participation, and invoking its "Rule of Restitution" in connection with his eligibility. The Court further ordered that Johnson must be treated as immediately eligible to compete during the pendency of the case.

In granting relief, the Court concluded that Johnson established a substantial likelihood of success on his antitrust claim under Ohio's Valentine Act, that he would suffer irreparable harm absent injunctive relief, that third parties would not be harmed by the injunction, and that preserving competition in collegiate labor markets serves the public interest.

In support of the motion, Shumaker submitted expert testimony from sports economist Dr. David Berri of Southern Utah University and sports administration and governance professor, Dr. B. David Ridpath of Ohio University, analyzing the labor market effects of NCAA eligibility restrictions in the NIL era and the NCAA's arbitrary application of its eligibility rules.

"This ruling ensures that an athlete is not permanently deprived of his final season due to circumstances beyond his control," Stack added. "We look forward to continuing to litigate this case and securing permanent relief."

This case marks the fifth eligibility challenge Shumaker attorneys have brought against the NCAA and the fourth time the firm has successfully secured preliminary equitable relief enabling an athlete to continue their athletic and academic careers.

The team of Shumaker lawyers who successfully presented at the evidentiary hearing on February 11, 2026, was comprised of Nicholas Stack, Diana Florence, and Evan Bunis. They were supported in preparation by Mark Wagoner, who anchors the firm's antitrust practice, Jacob Mertus, and co-chairs of firm's sports practice Robert Boland and Bennett Speyer.

"The Court's well-reasoned decision will hopefully lead to further reform on the part of the NCAA," said Diana Florence, who has been a part of all the firm's successful challenges in eligibility matters. "The Court clearly recognized that there are less restrictive alternatives by which the NCAA can maintain eligibility standards, enhance the quality of college athletics, and support athletes seeking to attain meaningful graduate educational opportunities like Puff."

Shumaker's national Sports Law practice represents a diverse group of coaches and athletic directors at NCAA member institutions, as well as institutional clients in collegiate and Olympic sports, professional franchises, professional coaches, and other sports figures and entertainers. Lawyers in the group collaborate with clients and their agents, accountants, and financial and other key advisors to create comprehensive career and financial plans and work collaboratively to protect the contractual and intellectual property rights of clients.