

The Columbus Dispatch

BASKETBALL

How Puff Johnson's long fight for NCAA eligibility ended with court win



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Key Points

Puff Johnson's college basketball career has been significantly impacted by injuries and illnesses, including Crohn's Disease.

After injuries at North Carolina and Penn State, Johnson sought a sixth year of eligibility from the NCAA, which was denied.

Johnson filed a lawsuit and was granted a temporary restraining order, allowing him to join the Ohio State basketball team.

A judge later approved a preliminary injunction, securing his eligibility for the remainder of the 2025-26 season.

The calendar flipping from Jan. 15 to Jan. 16 holds some special sway in the Johnson household.

On Jan. 15, 2022, Puff Johnson played the first game of his sophomore year at North Carolina after missing the prior 30 games for the Tar Heels due to injury. Three years later to the day, Johnson suffered what would be a season-ending wrist injury in his second season at Penn State, a diagnosis confirmed the next day.

And exactly one year later, on Jan. 16, 2026, Johnson's final Hail Mary to secure a final season of college basketball was answered when a Franklin County judge approved a [temporary restraining order](#) granting him immediate eligibility and the opportunity to join the [Ohio State](#) men's basketball team.

Coincidence? Johnson's father thinks not.

“That’s God,” Gilbert Johnson said. “That’s why I was so confident he would win out.”

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It wasn’t until Feb. 23, 12 days after [Puff Johnson](#) had his long-awaited day in court to tell his story, that the same judge approved a preliminary injunction granting him eligibility [for the remainder](#) of the 2025-26 season. No more day-to-day worrying, no more desperate pleas for someone to listen to his journey or uncertainty around what was ahead.

Johnson was officially a Buckeye, and there was nothing the NCAA or anyone else could do about it. All it took was years of perseverance, an emotional day inside Courtroom 7B at the Franklin County Common Pleas Courthouse and a whole lot of prayers.

Perhaps as critically as anything, it allowed Johnson to finally have his day in court to tell his story.

Injuries, sickness have long affected Ohio State's Puff Johnson

Seated inside judge Sheryl K. Munson’s courtroom, Johnson spent the morning of what would later be Ohio State’s 89-82 win against USC at the Schottenstein Center in a suit accented by a sharp pink tie testifying to the path that had gotten him here.

Before the injuries that would rob him of 54 games in a five-year span split between three years with the Tar Heels and two with the [Nittany Lions](#), Johnson was a sick kid whose eventual diagnosis of Crohn’s Disease proved a relief that there wasn’t something more seriously wrong. It started around fifth or sixth grade, when he started getting sick and losing weight.

In his testimony, Puff Johnson needed moments to compose himself while discussing the pain of seeing his father struggling with helping to get definitive answers about what was ailing his son.

“My parents never gave up on the type of person I could be and the type of things I could accomplish,” he said, fighting through tears. “They wanted me to have a good and healthy life. At the time basketball wasn’t even a thought in our minds because I was going through a lot physically.”

While they were eventually able to manage the disease, Johnson missed so much time in school that he had to be held back in eighth grade. With a diagnosis, proper treatment and an altered diet, Johnson quickly started growing again and was able to get back to playing basketball. Eventually, he became a four-star prospect in the 2020 class who signed with North Carolina, where he enrolled as a sports management major.

Playing inside empty arenas amid the COVID-19 pandemic, Johnson caught the virus, ultimately played in 14 games totaled 58 minutes of action before a broken foot sidelined him for more than a year. It cost him the final 15 games of the year and, when he had complications from surgery, the first 15 games of the 2021-22 season. Although players who participated in the 2020-21 season were granted a fifth year of eligibility, Johnson testified that North Carolina did not seek a medical hardship waiver for him after either of those two seasons.

Further, he was not allowed to file a request himself.

“If I could, I would (have),” Johnson testified while being questioned on the stand by his lawyer, Nicholas Stack.

Johnson’s start to his third season was derailed with a knee injury that cost him the preseason and the first three games and three more in ACC play. At season’s end, Johnson opted to transfer after having been healthy enough to appear in 65 of 101 possible games. A product of Coraopolis (Pennsylvania) Moon Area, Johnson signed with [Penn State](#) for the 2023-24 season.

“I wanted to be closer to home,” he testified. “Home means a lot to me. I wanted to do something for Penn State that was historic. I wanted to be that hometown hero.”

He joined the Nittany Lions with two seasons of eligibility remaining despite having been unable to play in more than one third of North Carolina's games during his three seasons there. The hope was for a fresh start, but the same issues that had hampered him in North Carolina followed him north.

Injuries pile up for Puff Johnson at Penn State

Johnson's knee wasn't fully healed, and a torn patella tendon cost him the preseason, the first two games of the season and two more in Big Ten play. A team captain who was able to play in 29 of 33 games and average 7.3 points and 3.1 rebounds, all career-high numbers to that point, Johnson said he realized by this point that he was building up a name he couldn't argue with.

"People told me that's the reputation they have on you, you're just a hurt, sick, injured kid," he said. "What am I supposed to do? You look at the facts and it's true. I wasn't able to play a full season."

Again, his preseason was curtailed, this time due a stress fracture in his heel before the 2024-25 season, and Johnson said "there was pressure everywhere" to get back on the court. He was out there for the season opener against Binghamton and in the lineup for remained there even after the season took a turn with a hard fall at Rutgers on Dec. 10. He was treated for right wrist discomfort and cleared to keep playing even without undergoing any imaging of scans of the wrist.

"If I'm OK, then I'm going to try to go play," he said. "That's always how I was. No one tried to stop me."

Johnson didn't miss a game until a concussion suffered Jan. 5 against Indiana forced him to the sideline for a game at Illinois three days later. He watched that game from his couch while wearing sunglasses, passed concussion protocol a few days later and returned for a Jan. 12 home game against Oregon.

He started, scored 15 points and played a season-high 36 minutes in the one-point loss that became his final full game in uniform for the Nittany Lions. In a Jan. 15

game at Michigan State, Johnson went up for a layup like he had when he suffered the concussion against Indiana. Not wanting to hit his head again, Johnson threw his hands to the ground to brace his fall.

He gutted out three more minutes before his wrist ballooned to the size of a softball, he said. His evening was over and so, too, was his season. He just didn't know it yet. Johnson woke up from surgery to repair what was thought to just be a broken bone and learned it was significantly worse.

“We were all under the presumption that I might be able to come back by the end of the year because what Penn State told me was I had a broken scaphoid bone and that the broken scaphoid bone could heal in roughly four to five weeks,” he said. “(The surgeon) told me, ‘Kid, you’re very, very lucky because you came very, very close to a dislocation.’ They had to treat my ligaments and my capsule damage in my wrist as if it was a dislocation injury. It wasn’t just a scaphoid, and ultimately is about an eight-month recovery with the damage to my capsule.”

Johnson’s surgeon, Dr. Glenn Buterbaugh, testified that the damage he saw inside Johnson’s right wrist would not have been caused by the fall against Michigan State but rather had been made worse after his fall against Rutgers had not been properly diagnosed. Johnson said that had Penn State gotten imaging on his wrist after the Rutgers game, the 10th of the season, he would not have played in any more games and been within the NCAA’s threshold for a medical hardship waiver.

Instead, he played through it, appeared in 17 games and entered the transfer portal at season’s end while planning to apply for a waiver for a sixth year of eligibility. Penn State started the waiver process for him, Johnson said, but once he was in the portal, “It just wasn’t good. They must’ve heard something along the lines of Ohio State.”

After years of injuries, Johnson had played in 111 of 165 (67.3%) possible games. It was time to take the battle to the courtroom.

Puff Johnson gets his day in court

Johnson committed to Ohio State for 2025-26, but his enrollment was contingent on gaining a sixth year of eligibility. Without getting a chance to tell his side of the story, his waiver was denied by the NCAA, as was an appeal in September, and Johnson testified that he was never given a reason why he was not allowed to speak on his behalf.

“I was upset,” he said. “I was saying, 'Where’s the justice in this?' All the (other) players are getting accepted and no one’s giving me the chance to say my half and what actually happened. Everyone came to conclusions about my career and my life without them knowing even 1% of what’s happened in my life and has happened in my career.

“I was asking, 'What is a medical hardship waiver if you’re not going to give it to someone with the type of medical issues I had in my career?’ ”

On Nov. 5, he [filed a lawsuit](#) in the United States District Court for the Southern District of Ohio Eastern Division seeking an injunction allowing him to play for the Buckeyes. Six days later, the court said his waiver for a sixth year did not violate antitrust law as alleged in his complaint and [dismissed the case](#) without Johnson having an opportunity to testify on his behalf.

Gilbert Johnson said that was the lowest point for his son, who felt out of options as the season got underway without him. A final opportunity remained: a lawsuit at the state level, one filed in January that gave him eligibility on that date again: Jan. 16.

What got the family through the process?

“Faith,” Gilbert Johnson said. “One hundred percent, have faith it will work out. And I said we’re not going to stop fighting until we get justice. Right will win out. You will get your chance in court, and you will prevail. I told him that.”

That decision was finally final Feb. 23. Since the temporary restraining order was approved, he has appeared in eight games and scored 21 points for the Buckeyes. He started a [66-60 loss](#) at No. 15 Michigan State on Feb. 22 in relief of Devin Royal, who was out due to illness, but also missed two games prior to that after suffering a concussion in practice that stunted his acclimation process.

However the season ends, it won't be a complete one for Puff Johnson. It won't even be half of one. What it will be, though, is a final chance to end his college career having spoken his truth, been vindicated in court and, hopefully, writing his own ending to the story.

“I just want a chance to finish my season,” he testified. “There’s been so many times my season has been cut short throughout my career. Almost every single season. I just want a chance to finish my season ... and try to become the best person I can be.”

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