

## Why Calvin Ridley's Betting Resulted in a Season-Long Suspension: Sports Betting Violations Explained

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Atlanta Falcons wide receiver and University of Alabama alumnus, Calvin Ridley, was suspended by the National Football League (NFL) for at least the 2022 season as a result of placing sports wagering parlay bets in November 2021.

In October 2021, Ridley took a step back from playing football to focus on his mental health. During this sabbatical, Ridley placed various bets over a five-day period while he remained on the non-football injury list, which permits NFL players to remain on a team's roster even though the player sustained an injury that was not football-related.<sup>1</sup> Ridley addressed the situation through a series of tweets, saying he only "bet 1500"<sup>2</sup> and accepted responsibility for his actions. Questions have been raised as to Ridley's seemingly-severe punishment, and the suspension sets a significant precedent.

Sports leagues often are at the intersection of legal disciplines involving contract, intellectual property, employment, and gambling law. In order to participate in a sports league, all players generally must agree to act in compliance with the policies set forth by the league; those policies function as private regulations for players, and players agree to abide by them via contract. In the context of sports betting, players agree to refrain from activities which may be legal otherwise, such as betting on a professional football game.

The NFL in particular says that it pays meticulous attention to all aspects of the game, including crafting the rules, training officials, and implementing technology, all to ensure the games are conducted with integrity and fairness.<sup>3</sup> Even though the commissioner has authority to run the league with discretion, he must still answer to the Executive Committee, which includes one representative from each of the league's 32 teams (generally an owner or top officer of the team's organization). "Any change in game rules, league policy, club ownership, or other modification to the game must be approved by at least three-fourths of the committee."<sup>4</sup> In fact, integrity has been incorporated into NFL player contracts:

INTEGRITY OF GAME. Player recognizes the detriment to the League and professional football that would result from impairment of public confidence in the honest and orderly conduct of NFL games or the integrity and good character of NFL players. Player therefore acknowledges his awareness that if he accepts a bribe or agrees to throw or fix an NFL game; fails to promptly report a bribe offer or an attempt to throw or fix an NFL game; **bets on an NFL game**; knowingly associates

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<sup>1</sup> *Falcons WR Calvin Ridley suspended indefinitely through at least 2022 season for betting on NFL games*, National Football League, available at <https://www.nfl.com/news/falcons-wr-calvin-ridley-suspended-indefinitely-through-2022-season-for-betting-> (Mar. 8, 2022).

<sup>2</sup> Calvin Ridley's Twitter, available at <https://twitter.com/CalvinRidley1/status/1500939522632302594?ext=HHwWhIC-veSitNQpAAAA> (Mar. 7, 2022).

<sup>3</sup> See *Integrity of the Game*, NFL Football Operations, available at <https://operations.nfl.com/inside-football-ops/nfl-operations/integrity-of-the-game/> (Mar. 9, 2022).

<sup>4</sup> *Id.*

with gamblers or gambling activity; uses or provides other players with stimulants or other drugs for the purpose of attempting to enhance on-field performance; or is guilty of any other form of conduct reasonably judged by the League Commissioner to be detrimental to the League or professional football, the Commissioner will have the right, but only after giving Player the opportunity for a hearing at which he may be represented by counsel of his choice, to fine Player in a reasonable amount; **to suspend Player for a period certain or indefinitely**; and/or to terminate this contract.<sup>5</sup>

The NFL places integrity of the game high on its priority list, and will exert discipline when an athlete places sports bets on games in his own league. The NFL further prohibits various gambling-related activities and explicitly prohibits all NFL personnel, including players, from placing bets on football:

All NFL Personnel are prohibited from placing, soliciting, or facilitating any bet, whether directly or indirectly through a third-party, on any NFL game, practice, or other event. This includes betting on game outcome, statistics, score, performance of any individual participant, or any other kind of “proposition bet” on which wagering is offered.<sup>6</sup>

Any violation of the aforementioned policy is reviewed on a case-by-case basis by the NFL Commissioner for disciplinary action, which includes fines, termination of employment, and/or banishment from the NFL for life.<sup>7</sup> The contract prohibitions are based on statutory precedent. Most states where sports betting is legal explicitly prohibit professional athletes from placing bets on the sports in which the athlete participates. For example, both Nevada and New Jersey, two pillars for sports betting legislation, generally do not allow wagers to be placed on sporting events by, or on behalf of, an official, owner, coach, or staff of a participant or team or participant in that event.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, such individuals are often likewise prohibited from having financial interests in sports books such as DraftKings, FanDuel, or BetMGM.

It is clear that the NFL regulations and contractual provisions are consistent with statutory prohibitions when it comes to who can place bets (and on what). Prohibiting athletes from betting on themselves, or industries that the athlete participates in, stems from the notion that sporting events could be corrupted by insider betting, potentially giving athletes (or other sports league personnel) the ability to attempt to fix a game or otherwise ensure a significant financial outcome from a successful bet. Such vulnerability to manipulation or fraud overall mirror the concerns protected by insider trading statutes, which set parameters around who can (and cannot) trade stocks based on knowledge not readily available to the public.

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<sup>5</sup> NFL Player Contract, United States Securities and Exchange Commission, available at [https://www.sec.gov/Archives/edgar/data/1573683/000104746913009713/a2216998zex-10\\_3.htm](https://www.sec.gov/Archives/edgar/data/1573683/000104746913009713/a2216998zex-10_3.htm) (Mar. 9, 2022) (emphasis added).

<sup>6</sup> *Gambling Policy* at § 2(2), National Football League, available at <https://nflcommunications.com/Documents/2018%20Policies/2018%20Gambling%20Policy%20-%20FINAL.pdf> (2018).

<sup>7</sup> *See id.* at § 7.

<sup>8</sup> NV GAM REG 22.1205; N.J. Stat. Ann. § 5:12A-11.

Similar logic is applied to athletes betting on their own games as a step toward protecting the integrity of the game, which was exemplified in a letter written by NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell to Ridley notifying Ridley of his suspension:

There is nothing more fundamental to the NFL's success – and to the reputation of everyone associated with our league – than upholding the integrity of the game. This is the responsibility of every player, coach, owner, game official, and anyone else employed in the league. Your actions put the integrity of the game at risk, threatened to damage public confidence in professional football, and potentially undermined the reputation of your fellow players throughout the NFL ... For decades, gambling on NFL games has been considered among the most significant violations of league policy warranting the most substantial sanction. In your case, I acknowledge and commend you for your promptly reporting for an interview, and for admitting your actions.<sup>9</sup>

Unfortunately, Ridley's actions demonstrated the exact behavior the NFL intended to prohibit, and Goodell's decision to suspend Ridley for an entire season sends a signal that the NFL will treat such violations very seriously, particularly in a time when sports betting by the general public is becoming more popular.

Ridley's contract will toll throughout the suspension and he can apply for reinstatement February 15, 2023, but he will forgo his \$11.116<sup>10</sup> million salary in the meantime. To date, Ridley has not appealed the suspension.

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<sup>9</sup> Falcon's Calvin Ridley Suspended Through at Least the 2022 Season for Betting on NFL Games in 2021 Season, NFL Communications, available at <https://nflcommunications.com/Pages/FALCONS%E2%80%99-CALVIN-RIDLEY-SUSPENDED-THROUGH-AT-LEAST-THE-2022-SEASON-FOR-BETTING-ON-NFL-GAMES--IN-2021-SEASON.aspx> (Mar. 7, 2022).

<sup>10</sup> *Falcons WR Calvin Ridley suspended indefinitely through at least 2022 season for betting on NFL games*, National Football League, available at <https://www.nfl.com/news/falcons-wr-calvin-ridley-suspended-indefinitely-through-2022-season-for-betting-> (Mar. 8, 2022).