

Equinox Trainer Says He Was Fired Over Racism Complaint

By **Julie Manganis**

Law360 (January 18, 2024, 2:38 PM EST) -- A Black personal trainer at an Equinox gym in Boston was subjected to "constant and pervasive" racism from co-workers and managers, then fired after he complained, according to a lawsuit filed Thursday in Massachusetts state court.

Obinna Ndugba worked at the upscale gym's Dartmouth Street location for nearly five years as a senior-level trainer and received above-average performance reviews before his career was derailed, according to the complaint filed in Suffolk County Superior Court.

Despite his professional accomplishments, Ndugba faced a "hostile, toxic and systemically racist" working environment, including being told that "Black guys are good for nothing but bodybuilding and physical work," references to Black "genetic material," and being told that it was "surprising" a Black trainer had "made it this far" at Equinox, according to the complaint.

Ndugba also says in the complaint he was told by white colleagues they were "uncomfortable" around Black people and that they "often affected a stereotypical 'Black' way of speaking" around him and other Black co-workers.

"The discriminatory treatment of Ndugba was not isolated but was emblematic of a toxic workplace culture permeated by such discriminatory behavior," the complaint alleges, citing lower hiring and promotion rates for Black and Latino employees along with higher rates of discipline and termination.

"Unfortunately, there is a long and sordid history of these types of allegations against Equinox management both in Massachusetts and throughout the country," Travis Pregent of Pregent Law, who represents Ndugba, told Law360 on Thursday.

Similar allegations against Equinox brought by a Black former employee at a Manhattan location resulted in a landmark **\$11.3 million verdict** by a New York federal jury in May.

Ndugba says in the complaint the company also employs a double standard for discipline, punishing Black and Latino employees for minor rules violations that white workers are not penalized for at all.

Ndugba says the company failed to respond to complaints from him, other employees and one of his clients, and instead "began a campaign of harassment and retaliation" aimed at pushing him out, according to the complaint.

He was no longer being given leads on potential new clients, started being stripped of responsibilities and was excluded from meetings — and the company began "manufacturing purported infractions" before firing him in April, according to the complaint.

The suit calls that firing "purely retaliatory" and an effort to "silence him for continuing to complain about the defendants' toxic and discriminatory working environment."

Ndugba "was an exceptional employee with a long career ahead of him, but he now finds himself without a job and without a realistic prospect for advancing his once-promising career," the complaint says.

The lawsuit seeks damages for discrimination based on race and for retaliation under Massachusetts'

anti-discrimination law, including lost wages, along with other compensatory and punitive damages.

Ndugba initially filed a complaint with the Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination in October but withdrew that complaint in order to file his lawsuit.

A message seeking comment from Equinox's parent company did not immediately receive a response.

Obinna Ndugba is represented by Travis T. Pregent of Pregent Law.

Counsel information for Equinox Dartmouth Street and Equinox Holdings Inc. was not immediately available.

The case is Ndugba v. Equinox Dartmouth Street et al., case number 2484CV00143, in the Suffolk County Superior Court of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

--Additional reporting by Rachel Scharf. Editing by Philip Shea.