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March 22, 2022

RE: Deshaun Watson's Trade to the Cleveland Browns Normalizes Sexual Exploitation

Mr. and Mrs. Jimmy Haslam
Haslam Sports Group
76 Lou Groza Blvd.
Berea, OH 44017

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Haslam:

We write to you today regarding the recent trade of quarterback Deshaun Watson to the Cleveland Browns, of which you are the proprietary owners. The National Center on Sexual Exploitation is a non-partisan nonprofit in Washington, DC, dedicated to addressing the full spectrum of sexual exploitation. Our mission—to build a world where people can live and love without sexual abuse and exploitation—makes it imperative that we voice our grave concern regarding the numerous, outstanding allegations of sexual misconduct against Mr. Watson.

While Mr. Watson's trade to the Cleveland Browns is being touted as historic due to your contract guaranteeing him more money than to any player in the history of the NFL, as well as more years than to any player in the history of the NFL, we lament that never in history has such a contract been extended to an individual with such a highly questionable track record of sexual misconduct. As you are undoubtedly aware, Mr. Watson faces **22 active civil suits** accusing him of sexual assault and misconduct.

Given these numerous allegations, the National Center on Sexual Exploitation is alarmed by your decision to move forward with placing Mr. Watson at the helm of your team. These concerns were only increased by the lack of care, attention, and gravity in the [statement](#) you released on the matter earlier this week. The 22 civil suits and counting are not merely “some legal proceedings” or “complex factors,” but instead represent survivors who have accused Mr. Watson of sexual abuse and exploitation. Apparently you neglected to reach out to a single one of these women during the course of your team's “comprehensive evaluation process.” By choosing to ignore their

accusations, you are sending a clear message that the Cleveland Browns does not take sexual assault and abuse seriously.

We remind you that the NFL includes the following statement in its [Personal Conduct Policy](#):

It is not enough simply to avoid being found guilty of a crime. We are all held to a higher standard and must conduct ourselves in a way that is responsible, promotes the values of the NFL, and is lawful.

Players convicted of a crime or subject to a disposition of a criminal proceeding (as defined in this Policy) are subject to discipline. But even if the conduct does not result in a criminal conviction, players found to have engaged in any of the following conduct will be subject to discipline. Prohibited conduct includes but is not limited to the following:

. . . Assault and/or battery, including sexual assault or other sex offenses . . . (emphasis added).

Sexual assault and violence against women are a pervasive blight on our society. At the National Center on Sexual Exploitation, we believe in the power of institutions and companies like the NFL and the Cleveland Browns to set standards that ensure collective responsibility in eliminating sexual violence. Tragically, in one of the most glaring cases of disregard for social responsibility that we have recently witnessed, you have contracted with Mr. Watson. Such decisions have lasting social consequences far beyond the realm of sports and profits. Research has shown that as many as 65% of victims of sexual assault or rape do not report the occurrence, due to factors such as fear and a lack of faith in the system to hold their abusers accountable. By ignoring these pending cases and even rewarding a potential serial abuser, you are fostering a culture of silence which only furthers the normalization of sexual violence against women.

Of the cases brought forward against Mr. Watson, there appears to be an obvious pattern of sexual abuse occurring at massage parlors and with massage therapists, a national issue that has sparked increased attention on sexual exploitation occurring within the massage industry. Considering the structure of the contract you have executed with Mr. Watson—which appears to have safeguards in place to protect him financially were he to be suspended—we assume you understand that there is a likelihood these cases may soon affirm the women who have come forth. While we reserve final judgment, and respect the right to due process, until all 22 cases are resolved, the National Center on Sexual Exploitation would like to know what steps you are taking to ensure that Mr. Watson will not engage in sexual abuse and exploitation while he is a player of the Cleveland Browns.

We ask you to respond to the following:

- What systems or policies do you have in place to protect against sexual abuse and exploitation?
- As a condition of employment, have you prohibited Mr. Watson from visiting massage parlors or hiring massage therapists to visit him in his home, hotel, or at work?
- Will Mr. Watson ever be permitted to be one-on-one with a female employee of the Cleveland Browns franchise? Of the NFL? If so, how will safety of those involved be ensured?
- Will Mr. Watson be suspended or terminated if judgements in one, or any number of the 22 cases, are rendered against him?
- Will Mr. Watson be suspended or terminated if there is another sexual assault allegation raised against him while employed by the Cleveland Browns?
- Will you meet with his accusers to hear their stories?

- Will the Cleveland Browns take a stand against all forms of sexual abuse and exploitation by enacting clear policies that prevent players and all employees from sexual misconduct and hold them accountable if they engage in such conduct?

At present, it strains credulity to believe that the Cleveland Browns and the NFL as a whole are in anyway concerned about issues of sexual violence and exploitation when we witness your franchise choose to promote and elevate an alleged, serial sexual exploiter. The NFL continues to operate with [unclear and inconsistently-applied policy regarding NFL personnel and their sexual misconduct](#), and your decision to contract with Mr. Watson only furthers this hypocrisy.

Accordingly, [we are reissuing our call to the NFL to take seriously matters of sexual exploitation](#) by improving and consistently applying its policy regarding sexual abuse and exploitation. It is simply unacceptable that high-profile players like Mr. Watson are not held to a clear, rigorous, and consistently applied standard that prioritizes the rights and well-being of those who are being sexually abused and exploited. Issues of sexual abuse and exploitation are not mere inconveniences for a highly visible and supposedly respectable organization to brush off with sterilized press statements. They are serious issues of truth and justice for all that impact real human beings and the wellbeing of our culture.

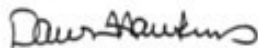
In closing, we invite you, as the owners of the Cleveland Browns, to join with us in fighting against the normalization of all forms of sexual abuse and exploitation and choose to stand for the human dignity of all. As sad and lamentable as the circumstances which precipitated this letter are, we recognize that they represent opportunity—the opportunity to close a chapter on misogynistic and exploitative attitudes and behaviors, and to work collaboratively to build a world where all are free from sexual abuse and exploitation. We hope you will recognize the gravity of the current situation and take immediate steps to begin the process of addressing the policies and priorities that will ensure Mr. Watson, and all those associated with the NFL, are “held to a higher standard.”

We are available to meet with you to discuss ways by which you can become true leaders in the fight for a world free from sexual exploitation. Please contact us at public@ncose.com or at 202.393.7245.

Respectfully,



Patrick Trueman, Esq.
President



Dawn Hawkins
CEO

CC:
Roger Goodell, NFL Commissioner
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