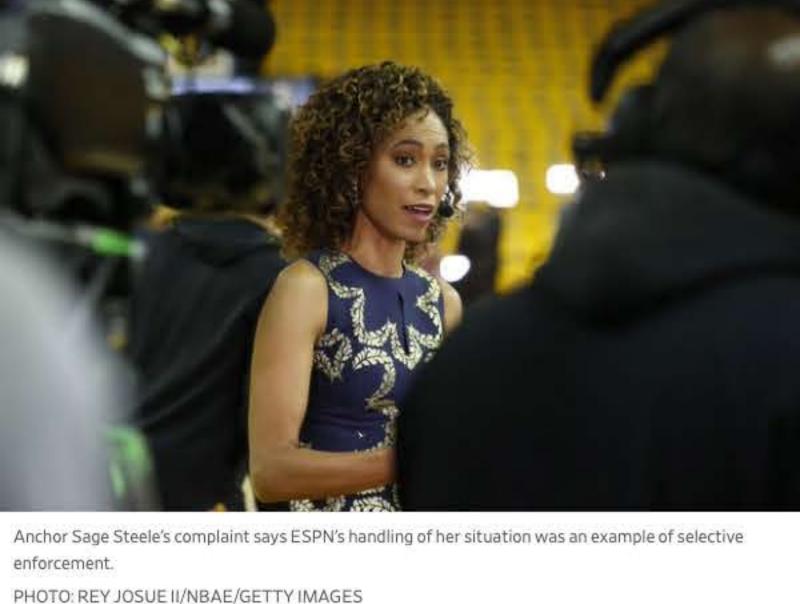
THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

WSJ NEWS EXCLUSIVE MEDIA & MARKETING

ESPN Anchor Sage Steele Sues Network, Alleging Violation of FreeSpeech Rights Lawsuit centers on Ms. Steele's comments about Covid-19, ex-

President Obama in a podcast interview last year



By Joe Flint
Updated April 27, 2022 8:26 pm ET

alleging the company retaliated against her for comments she made in a

podcast interview, breaching her contract and violating her free-speech

ESPN anchor Sage Steele sued the network and its parent, Walt Disney Co.,

rights.

In comments last September on a podcast hosted by former National
Football League quarterback Jay Cutler, Ms. Steele touched on political and

social topics, questioning Covid-19 vaccine mandates and former President

Barack Obama's decision to identify as Black instead of biracial.

ESPN forced her to issue an apology and temporarily benched her, according to the suit, which was served in Connecticut, where the network is based.

ESPN also retaliated by taking away prime assignments and failing to stop

After Ms. Steele's remarks drew criticism in the press and on social media,

The complaint says ESPN's handling of Ms. Steele's situation was an example of selective enforcement of a network policy that bars news personnel from taking positions on political or social issues.

ESPN has "violated Connecticut law and Steele's rights to free speech based

bullying and harassment by Ms. Steele's colleagues, the suit alleges.

unenforced workplace policy that serves as nothing more than pretext," according to the suit, which seeks unspecified damages.

In a statement, ESPN said, "Sage remains a valued contributor on some of

ESPN's highest profile content, including the recent Masters telecasts and

The suit also said ESPN took its actions based on "inaccurate third-party

accounts of Steele's comments, and that the network did not immediately

upon a faulty understanding of her comments and a nonexistent,

anchoring our noon SportsCenter."

Freedman, said in a statement.

employer.

thoughtfully."

"Sage is standing up to corporate America to ensure employees don't get their rights trampled on or their opinions silenced," her lawyer, Bryan

with their performance or working relationship with the company.

Ms. Steele's podcast interview last September was on "Uncut with Jay
Cutler," a program that isn't affiliated with ESPN or Disney. The suit said

Ms. Steele appeared as a private citizen and wasn't speaking for her

Amendment rights, as long as their statements don't materially interfere

The suit pointed to a provision in Connecticut law that it said prohibits

companies from disciplining employees for exercising their First

because it was required by Disney and called the mandate "sick" and "scary to me in many ways." She said she complied to keep her job and support her family.

The veteran "SportsCenter" anchor also talked about her decision to identify as biracial. During the interview with Mr. Cutler, Ms. Steele said

she thought it was fascinating that Mr. Obama chose to identify as Black

"You do you. I'm going to do me," Ms. Steele said in the interview.

Black father "was nowhere to be found."

despite having been raised by his white mother and grandmother, while his

Ms. Steele told Mr. Cutler that she had recently gotten the Covid-19 vaccine

began on social media over her remarks. On Oct. 4, Ms. Steele was told she would be "sidelined" or "taking a break," which she saw as a euphemism for a suspension, according to the complaint. ESPN said Ms. Steele wasn't suspended.

Ms. Steele alleged she was forced to issue an apology that said, "I know my

recent comments created controversy for the company, and I apologize. We

are in the midst of an extremely challenging time that impacts all of us, and

it's more critical than ever that we communicate constructively and

assignments including coverage of the New York City Marathon and

hosting the network's annual summit celebrating women and diverse

Soon after the interview aired on Sept. 29, a backlash against Ms. Steele

voices, the suit said.

In February of this year, Ms. Steele sent a letter to ESPN's human resources department complaining about her treatment and was subsequently offered the assignment to co-host "The Masters Tournament," according to the suit.

After returning to work a few weeks later, Ms. Steele was taken off major

In the suit, Ms. Steele points to examples of other ESPN colleagues making political comments on-air and on social media without facing punishment.

This isn't the first time Ms. Steele has clashed with her superiors and

colleagues. In 2020 she complained to ESPN management that she believed she was excluded from a special on race because some of her Black colleagues didn't view her as an authentic voice for the Black community.

At the time, an ESPN spokesman denied that the decision not to use Ms.

Steele in the special was due to her views or a campaign by her colleagues

Write to Joe Flint at joe.flint@wsj.com

to undermine her.







All Rights Reserved.



