



BENTON EMPLOYMENT LAW

## **Mario Godiva and Chambord Benton-Hayes are available for interviews**

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## **Celebrity Fitness Trainer Mario Godiva, 16-Year Equinox Veteran, Sues Gym Giant for Race and Disability Discrimination, Wrongful Termination**

SAN FRANCISCO, June 17, 2026 — For more than a decade, [Mario Godiva](#) was one of the faces Equinox promoted to build its reputation as an exclusive brand that positioned itself as an elite fitness destination. Godiva's clients, including many celebrities, were drawn to his engaging personality and innovative training methods, leading to features on CNN, Men's Journal and Health360. His work was named one of New York's hottest workouts by the New York Post, best workout for legs by Time Out New York, and Chicago's best workout by the Chicago Tribune.

But after nearly 16 years of service, Equinox fired Godiva in retaliation for complaints he made about race discrimination — he is Black — disability discrimination stemming from two serious health crises, and unequal pay, according to an employment discrimination lawsuit filed today in San Francisco Superior Court.

Godiva has dedicated his life to helping people move and get fit.

After earning his group fitness certification, the Kenosha, Wisconsin native moved to New York in 2009 and quickly established himself as a trainer at Crunch Fitness, [specializing in Kangoo Jumps](#)—spring-loaded, shock-absorbing exercise shoes. His popularity grew rapidly, and he developed a devoted Kangoo Jumps following as the go-to trainer for celebrity clients. Major media, recognizing a unique approach to getting fit, were drawn to report on Kangoo Jumps and the charming fitness trainer who helped popularize the method.

New York-based Equinox recruited Godiva in April 2010 to be a group fitness instructor at its midtown Manhattan location on West 50<sup>th</sup> Street. His talent was in demand, as was his loyal following and celebrity clientele, the lawsuit states. Godiva was one of a handful of instructors certified to teach

across all four studio categories at Equinox: Cycle, Barre/Pilates, Yoga, and Conditioning/HIIT at \$50 per class. This earned him prime-time class slots.

While [Godiva was valued for what he brought to the brand](#) — including interviews on CNN, Men's Journal, [ABC Nightline](#), The [New York Times](#), The [Tyra Banks Show](#) — he was paid less than his white colleagues who had similar or less experience, the lawsuit states.

He started at \$8 per hour and \$50 per class — less than he'd earned at Crunch — and received no raise at all for the first four years of his employment. His final class rate, \$75, reached only in October 2024, after 14 years, still fell below what Equinox's white instructors were earning, the suit says.

“This is called racial tokenism,” said [Chambord Benton-Hayes](#), of Benton Employment Law and Godiva's attorney. “Equinox showcased Mario to signal their diversity, but behind the scenes treated him unfairly and considered him a second-class employee.”

That disparity became apparent early.

On Sept. 21, 2015, according to the lawsuit, an Equinox member called Godiva the N-word during a class. He reported it immediately to management, but received little to no response, the lawsuit states. So Godiva escalated his complaint to human resources, and still there was no adequate investigation or corrective action, according to the complaint. This left him feeling unprotected and led him to believe that Equinox was endorsing the conduct as acceptable, the lawsuit states.

In 2014, Godiva survived cancer. In 2017, he moved to California and continued with Equinox. In 2021, he was laid off during COVID-19; upon rehiring in 2022, the lawsuit says, the company failed to restore his promised seniority.

On June 29, 2022, Godiva was admitted to UC San Diego Hospital and placed in the ICU, where he was intubated and diagnosed July 5 with Cryptococcal Meningitis — a life-threatening brain and spinal infection, according to the lawsuit. While he was fighting for his life in the ICU, his manager sent him 27 text messages, the lawsuit alleges, including messages pressing him to contact HR and warning him he could be terminated if he did not file a leave of absence packet.

HR itself emailed him a threat of "voluntary resignation" if he did not complete a 34-page leave of absence form — while he was hospitalized, the lawsuit says.

On top of that, Godiva received at least 33 emails from the company's leave vendor during his hospitalization, according to the complaint. Once he was medically cleared to return, healthy and eager, the lawsuit says his manager ignored his clearance and cut him to a single class, citing "business decisions," while taking his prime-time Tabata Max class and double sessions for herself.

He had been teaching four well-attended classes before his leave; teaching one class, given his hour-long commute, was neither practical nor economically viable, the lawsuit says.

He filed formal complaints about the ICU harassment and scheduling retaliation. The company told him that his concerns "could not be substantiated" and that it did not anticipate "any ongoing issues," the lawsuit says.

In 2023, Godiva transferred to Equinox's San Francisco facility, where the same pattern persisted: a prime-time Thursday Cycle class he took over was stripped from him after only three weeks, with a newly hired, less qualified white instructor given the slot despite, the lawsuit says, attendance actually increasing under Godiva's instruction.

By February 2026, Godiva was the only African American instructor on the Union Street schedule, teaching a single class. On Jan. 27, 2026, management directed him to convert his class format to "True Barre," a directive Godiva had already flagged in writing to HR as retaliatory and an attempt to constructively discharge him, the lawsuit says.

On Feb. 13, 2026, following a member complaint about the class, Godiva was fired, citing his alleged deviation from the True Barre curriculum. What was the deviation? Squats and core work, which the official True Barre manual expressly includes as part of the program, the lawsuit states.

The lawsuit calls the firing pretextual, noting he was informed of his termination less than six hours after being told of the complaint.

Equinox has faced similar allegations before: [a jury awarded trainer Röbyynn Europe \\$11.25 million](#) — including \$10 million in punitive damages — in a race and gender discrimination case. A separate jury awarded trainer [Lajos "Lali" Hugyetz \\$32.2 million](#) in a disability discrimination case, including \$24 million in punitive damages, according to the complaint.

“This isn’t the first time Equinox is hearing about its endemic discrimination. The company has already paid tens of millions of dollars in jury verdicts for discriminating against Black and disabled trainers,” said employment attorney Angel Alexander, also of Benton Employment Law. “After dedicating 15 years of his life and career to Equinox and serving as their spokesperson, Mr. Godiva was discarded like trash. He was not afforded the human decency to address the allegations against him, nor was he provided the dignity of an in-person termination.”

“I have spent my entire career helping people find strength in their bodies. Now I’m using that same strength to stand up for myself and for everyone who has ever been minimized, retaliated against, or made to feel grateful for mistreatment,” Godiva said. “You can’t celebrate someone publicly and diminish them privately. Speaking up is not being difficult. It’s refusing to disappear.”

The lawsuit, filed Wednesday in San Francisco County Superior Court, seeks compensatory and punitive damages, back pay, attorneys' fees, and a jury trial.

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*Chambord Benton-Hayes, of Oakland-based [Benton Employment Law](#), successfully represents clients in litigation and arbitration concerning sexual harassment, various forms of discrimination, retaliation, wrongful termination, and harassment, both individually and in class actions.*

*[Mario Godiva](#) is a nationally recognized fitness expert, celebrity trainer, health coach, and creator of [Interval Mindfulness®](#). His work has been featured by major media outlets including CNN, Men’s Journal, ABC Nightline, The New York Times, and The Tyra Banks Show. For more than two*

*decades, he has helped clients build strength, resilience, and confidence through movement, coaching, and mind-body training.*