

The case of NFL football star Michael Vick

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Following a week of intense media scrutiny, Michael Vick, National Football League (NFL) quarterback for the Atlanta Falcons, pled guilty on August 27 to federal dogfighting charges. Vick, whose sentencing is set for December 10, faces the possibility of up to 5 years in prison, but is expected to serve only 12 to 18 months due to his plea agreement.

In a public statement, Vick spoke directly to fans saying, “I want to apologize to all the young kids out there for my immature acts and, you know, what I did was ... very immature so that means I need to grow up. I totally ask for forgiveness and understanding as I move forward to bettering Michael Vick the person, not the football player.”

Vick had been indicted by a federal grand jury in July. The charges leveled against him were disturbing. The star athlete was indicted for financing and operating an interstate dogfighting enterprise called “Bad Newz Kennels,” using a property he owned in Virginia to train and house animals and to host fights. Vick is said to have been involved in the killing—by drowning, hanging, electrocution and other methods—of dogs that did not perform up to expectations.

Dogfighting, like cockfighting, is a savage blood sport in which two animals specially bred for combat are pitted against one another in a makeshift arena, often fighting to the death. Spectators gamble on the outcome of the event as they might on a boxing match or horse race. It is often the case that animals trained to fight in such competitions, when confiscated by authorities, must be euthanized due to the danger they present to humans. More than 50 fighting dogs seized from Vick’s kennel are expected to be destroyed.

Because of the scandal associated with his actions, the quarterback rapidly lost lucrative deals with Reebok, the company that marketed his football jerseys, and Nike, which had a product line of shoes bearing Vick’s name and jersey number. Following his guilty plea, the NFL also suspended Vick indefinitely without pay.

Without ignoring or excusing his actions, one can’t help but note the tragic element in Michael Vick’s story.

The future NFL star, born in 1980, grew up in Newport News, Virginia (population 180,000—known as “Newport Bad News”), in one of the city’s poorest housing projects,

the Ridley Circle homes, located in the East End. The area has been devastated by crime and poverty. His seventh-grade teacher told the *Virginian-Pilot*, “He has seen so many kids killed and put in jail, kids that he grew up with.”

Vick’s parents were still teenagers when he was born and struggled to make ends meet. His mother Brenda Vick worked at Kmart and held a part-time job as a school bus driver. Michael Boddie, his father, worked long hours as a sandblaster in the Newport News shipyards.

Conditions in the area remain so severe to this day and the level of violence so high that this month some 60 residents held a march for peace following their city’s 22nd homicide so far this year (compared to 19 in all of 2006).

While certain residents of the area have denied that dogfighting goes on there, others disagree. One resident, Antwan Parson, who grew up not far from Vick, told Virginia’s WTKR news channel “People out here fight dogs all the time.”

This brutal atmosphere clearly had an effect on the young Michael Vick. Speaking with the *Daily Press* of Newport News in 2001, Vick discussed his childhood: “I would go fishing even if the fish weren’t biting just to get out of there.”

Vick’s athletic talents first made themselves known when he played in a childhood football league run by the Boys & Girls Club. In high school, Vick excelled at his sport, passing for 4,846 yards and earning 43 touchdowns throughout his career. His high school English teacher spoke highly of Vick, who earned Bs. His athletic ability won him a scholarship to Virginia Tech university in Blacksburg, Virginia.

Vick’s extraordinary playing in college landed him on the cover of *ESPN The Magazine*. In 1999 he won the first Archie Griffin Award, presented to the Most Valuable Player in college football in a given season. Vick received an ESPY award in 2000 in the category of Best College Football Player.

Well aware of his abilities and with his family’s financial situation in mind, Vick chose to leave Virginia Tech following his sophomore season and turn professional.

Becoming a professional player no doubt gave Vick and

his family the hopes of success and financial stability. It's something young athletes dream of their whole lives. But what sort of atmosphere was the young quarterback thrown into?

The multi-billion dollar American football industry is an increasingly nasty affair, which encourages a gladiatorial atmosphere and appeals to some of the worst instincts in its audience. For certain sections of a discontented, seething but largely unconscious population, professional football functions as an outlet for all sorts of pent-up emotions.

As we have noted before, the fans' "love affair" with a given athlete, particularly at a time of multi-million dollar salaries and shrinking economic possibilities for wide layers of people, is unstable and tenuous and can turn to resentment and even hatred overnight.

Sports in a class-divided society must play a social function. Professional football, more than any other sport in America at the moment, is awash with nationalist and militaristic symbolism. Football jargon, as has been pointed out numerous times, is telling: "in the trenches," "bomb," "blitz," "air raid," "gunner," etc. American flags and official patriotism are plentiful in and around the stadiums.

Brutality in the sport and on the field is cultivated. While in the midst of his own legal troubles in 2000, Baltimore Ravens linebacker Ray Lewis commented, "If you don't want me hanging out with thugs, then I can't be on the football field on Sundays either, because there are thugs in every huddle." According to *Washington Post* research, some 36 players (four of them multiple times) on 16 football teams were arrested in 2006 on charges ranging from drunk driving to assault.

Vick's own younger brother, Marcus, has had his share of legal troubles, and while playing football with Virginia Tech, once stomped on the knee of University Of Louisville player Elvis Dumervil. He eventually left the team and the school.

When misconduct spills over the boundaries of the playing field, as it so often does, it is often overlooked or underplayed unless it conflicts with the business—the profits—of the NFL teams.

When an incident like Vick's dogfighting scandal gets into the hands of the national media causing embarrassment for the league, the out-of-control player, whose risk has come to outweigh whatever reward he can generate, has to be "sidelined."

As always, the US news media has been more than happy to play the role of torch-bearing villagers hot on the heels of Michael Vick's Frankenstein's monster.

The media coverage of the Vick case has been predictable, a mixture of superficiality, sensationalism and hypocrisy. Here is another figure—like pop star Britney Spears, actress

Lindsay Lohan or professional celebrity Paris Hilton—ripe for their scorn, a new and easy target for their manufactured outrage. In all cases, the media firestorms serve to distract viewers or readers from the more pressing concerns of the day. Certainly no serious analysis into the conditions of poverty and backwardness that give rise to such brutal "sports" as dog fighting finds its way into their coverage.

Fox News' Bill O'Reilly chimed in on the case with his usual stupidity to blame dogfighting on hip hop music. Comic Bill Maher, host of HBO's political roundtable show "Real Time" and PETA board member, said "I hope Michael Vick rots in hell, and I don't even believe in hell."

Before Vick's day in court, the sports pages and television sports channels wondered out loud whether the star player would "get it right," i.e., demonstrate the proper contrition in public after his courtroom appearance. Vick, it was made clear, would have to "take responsibility" for his actions if he expected any sympathy or support. As ABC News explained, "If Michael Vick ever wants to play pro football again, experts say he only has one option: apologize."

It's impossible to determine the sincerity of his comments, but Vick apparently satisfied the media. In his public statement, he said, "I take full responsibility for my actions." Moreover, he continued, "I'm upset with myself, and, you know, through this situation I found Jesus and asked him for forgiveness and turned my life over to God. And I think that's the right thing to do as of right now."

The tone of the media coverage has become decidedly more muted since Vick's public appearance. Certain practical calculations come into play. If Vick goes to prison for 12 to 18 months, he may still prove able to play football, if not at quarterback, then at some other position.

CBS SportsLine.com columnist Mike Freeman cites the comments of an unnamed NFL general manager: "If he went to jail, and then left prison down the road, he'd still be relatively young, and there'd be a line of 15 to 20 teams waiting to sign him."

The team official continued: "Teams may say one thing publicly. But if he gets out of jail, we'll all be looking at Vick hard. We're all whores in football. You know the saying. We'd sign an ax murderer if he has ability. He'll be back. He won't be back in Atlanta probably but he'll be back in professional football. You can count on it."



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