

Second Chances

BY KIM R. JESSUM

As the current regular football season is nearing its end, most Philadelphians are hopeful that the Philadelphia Eagles make an appearance in the playoffs and ultimately the Super Bowl. However, there are some former Eagles fans who do not want our home team to do well. The sole reason for their switch is due to one player – Michael Vick.

What Michael Vick did off the field when he was the quarterback of the Atlanta Falcons is reprehensible. Although he was never a fan favorite in Philadelphia, he was a role model to many and no one ever expected such a successful, professional athlete to be involved in such heinous crimes.

It all started in April 2007 when investigators conducted a drug search at Vick's home in Virginia. Authorities found 66 dogs, including 55 pit bulls, and equipment commonly used in dog fighting ranging from a rape stand that holds aggressive dogs in place for mating and a breakstick used to pry open a dog's mouth. Vick originally denied any involvement, but several months later, he pleaded guilty to felony charges of running an interstate dog fighting ring known as "Bad Newz Kennels." The case drew widespread publicity and angered many animal lovers throughout the United States.

Gruesome details of Vick's operation were revealed, including how underperforming dogs were executed by electrocution and hanging. Vick even admitted to personally torturing and killing the dogs. Vick was sentenced to 23 months in prison and was ordered to pay nearly \$1 million for the care and rehabilitation of the dogs seized from his property. He served 18 months before he was released to spend two more months under house arrest.

In addition, Vick was suspended by the NFL, ordered to return over \$19 million in earnings to the Atlanta Falcons, and lost millions of dollars in endorsements. Because of his debts, he later had to file for bankruptcy.

As most of us know, dog fighting is a form of gambling where dogs are trained to fight in a ring, often to their death. Dog fighting is a felony in all 50 states. In Pennsylvania, dog fighting is covered under the statute governing cruelty to animals, codified as 18 Pa.C.S.A. § 5511.

I vividly remember the day it was announced that Vick signed with the Eagles to be a backup quarterback behind Donovan

McNabb and Kevin Kolb. I was waiting for an overseas flight and my soon-to-be fiancé received a text message from his friend in Pittsburgh about Philadelphia having dog killers. I knew what that meant and was devastated to learn that my favorite football team just lowered its standards to hire criminals as players. Although this was not the first time the Eagles signed a controversial player, namely, Terrell Owens (T.O.), the organization was now bringing a player on board whose behavior was far worse than anything T.O. ever did.

When I returned from my trip, I heard that many fans sold their season tickets and some sporting goods stores refused to sell Vick's No. 7 jersey. I personally know several people who were so disgusted with the signing of Vick that they no longer watch the Eagles and have switched allegiance to another team. I kept my season tickets, but proceeded to relay my discontent by booing every time Vick was sent into the game and cheered when he did not do well. I cringed whenever I heard a fan chant "Who let the dogs out" or saw a young child wearing a No. 7 jersey. I certainly was not the only one who did not want Vick to be a member of my home team, but there were also many Vick fans who wanted to give him a second chance. Unfortunately, some wanted it solely because he had the

potential to be the quarterback to take the Eagles to the Super Bowl again and did not care what he did in his past.

I do believe in second chances, but had yet to see why Vick deserved one. Of course, he has improved tremendously as a player on the field over the past year, but has he really changed to be a better person? When it became obvious during the 2010-2011 season that Vick was not leaving Philadelphia any time soon, I decided to research whether Vick has changed. I had not seen or read much local publicity about Vick's anti-cruelty efforts, and the Eagles, until recently, seemed to have done almost nothing with regard to the issue. With just a little bit of research though, what I did find was actually quite promising.

Back when Vick was still in prison, he requested a meeting with Wayne Pacelle, the president and CEO of the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), to work with the organization after he was released. Pacelle surprisingly agreed to the partnership and ever since Vick was released from prison, they have been working together to stop dog fighting through the HSUS' End Dogfighting™ campaign.





According to the HSUS, large operations of dog fighting have declined in recent years, but street dog fighting is on the rise. Vick's first appearance for HSUS occurred in early August 2008 after he was conditionally reinstated in the NFL, but before he was a member of any team. Although he told the audience what he did was wrong, per his wishes, he spoke to only 55 people at a suburban Atlanta community center and prohibited most from the very neighborhood he was supposed to be helping from attending.

Fortunately, in his subsequent speaking engagements, Vick spoke to many more at-risk youth and urged the community to help with his campaign against dog fighting. Vick has made at least 14 appearances nationwide speaking to boys and young men in urban areas as part of his pledge to help the HSUS' End Dogfighting™ campaign. In November, Pabelle and Vick visited schools in New Haven, Conn. to talk to thousands of students about animal cruelty. Vick delivered a compelling message that dog fighting is a dead-end road that sends dogs to the grave and young men to prison.

During his appearances, Vick often explains that he was raised in a tough neighborhood in Newport News, Va., where he was exposed to dog fighting at a young age. There, he faced the same temptations and bad influences that confront the young people he now targets on a daily basis. Locally, Vick has shared his story with students at Imhotep Institute Charter High School, which located in what is considered to be a high-risk area for dog fighting.

The Phillies organization has been a supporter of animal welfare organizations for quite some time ranging from player appearances to

calendar sales. Finally, the Eagles have joined the Phillies in its efforts and launched the Treating Animals With Kindness (TAWK) initiative to diminish the abuse of animals, promote responsible adoption, encourage spaying and neutering, and stop dog fighting through education and awareness. With the initiative, a \$500,000 grant program was created and several organizations have already received grants. See www.philadelphiaeagles.com/community/eaglestawk.asp for more information about the program.

The canine victims of Vick's dog-fighting ring travel their own path of redemption. Forty-seven of the dogs rescued from Vick's property survived with the majority of them becoming family pets, agility champions, and even therapy dogs. To learn more about their story, read *The Lost Dogs: Michael Vick's Dogs and Their Tale of Rescue and Redemption* (Gotham, \$26) written by *Sports Illustrated* senior editor Jim Gorant.

Many of us will never forgive Michael Vick, but it appears that he and the Eagles organization are doing the right thing. Because of his background, Vick is an ideal role model for at-risk kids. If Vick saves just one dog from being tortured or killed or just one person from entering the world of dog fighting, then the work he is doing with the HSUS should be at least be encouraged. And, for many Eagles fans, it certainly would not hurt if he led the Philadelphia Eagles to a Super Bowl victory. ■

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