

Cruel, but not unusual

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What amazed me as the Michael Vick dogfighting case unfolded in the public arena was neither the knee-jerk reactions along racial lines, nor the insipid debates among sports commentators regarding Vick's character and what would constitute appropriate sanctions by the judicial system and the National Football League. What surprised me was the virtual silence of LGBT human rights groups.

Should the queer community be concerned about how our society reacts to a known dogfighting operation funded by a heavily involved celebrity athlete? Yes, if for no other reason than if our society is not prepared to reject cruelty and suffering decisively wherever we find it, then we leave the door open to thinking that maybe, just maybe, it is understandable to be cruel and inhumane to those we do not care for.

And there goes the defense of all hate crime legislation.

For those of you who have been in hibernation, earlier this summer the federal government charged Vick and several of his friends on multiple felony federal charges stemming from a dogfighting operation that has been running since Vick's rookie season with the Atlanta Falcons in 2001. Vick, who bankrolled the operation, for weeks denied his involvement. But after his three co-defendants reached plea agreements with prosecutors and were poised to testify against him, Vick finally pleaded guilty last week to conspiracy to cross state lines to engage in illegal gambling; to sponsor a dog in an animal fighting venture; and to buy, transport and receive dogs for animal fighting.

He stood on the courthouse steps and publicly apologized, saying that in the past few weeks he had "found Jesus." When he is sentenced in December, he could face more than one year of prison time.

[As of Monday, by the way, nothing about the Bad Newz Kennels he ran was mentioned on Vick's official Web site, www.mikevick.com. The site did say his favorite hobby was fishing and his pets were birds and dogs.]

The phrases used by many who spoke about forgiveness and redemption for Vick were revealing. Almost anyone in recovery can tell you that apologies are only sincere and legitimate when they fully embrace the magnitude of the transgressions and the ramifications of them. Instead, Vick's supporters said he made "a bad decision." No – he made bad decision after bad decision, day after day, for six years. Each decision cost suffering and death. And he's not the one who "fell into a bad situation." That would be the dogs, and Vick would be the one who pushed them.

Was Vick's operation an aberration, an extreme expression of a strictly underground urban phenomenon? No. Animal fights have been going on for centuries strictly for the amusement of human spectators. Rome had its Coliseum battles of beasts from Africa. More than a millennium later in urban and rural settings alike, we have dog fights, cock fights, and dog-vs.-hog battles.

In 1987 after the Whittier Narrows earthquake in Los Angeles, I worked on a story in which I was reporting how various animals reacted to and after the earthquake. When I called a local shelter, I found the loudest ruckus came from a huge group of gamecocks that were being held as evidence in a cockfighting criminal case. That was just a few miles from my home and I had not even known about it. These days, all I would have to do to buy a book or DVD on how to breed and train killer dogs or birds would be to go online to Amazon.

There is widespread evidence that dogfighting is more common among pro athletes than the public would like to believe. In recent years former NFL running back LeShon Johnson and former National Basketball Association forward Qyntel Woods pleaded guilty to charges stemming from dogfighting.

The Animal Legal and Historical Center says dogfighting in the United States is a multimillion-dollar industry engaging 20,000 to 40,000 people, despite being illegal in every state, and a felony in all states except Idaho and Wyoming.

Connections between abuse of animals and abuse of humans has been statistically illustrated repeatedly. Tolerance of the former desensitizes people to the latter. A society cannot legitimately declare it has evolved if its cultural conscience remains in a Neanderthal pit.

As the Humane Society of the United States' Web site notes, "While it is true that cockfighting has been practiced for centuries in various countries, including the United States, 'old' does not necessarily mean right or even acceptable. At one time the United States allowed slavery, lacked child abuse laws, and refused women the vote."

While mainstream media outlets and the animal rights groups were busy commenting on the Vick case, the LGBT human rights groups weren't proactively saying peep. I contacted the National Black Justice Coalition for its take on the matter.

"Traditionally, NBJC has stayed out of Hollywood-ish/pop culture issues and instead chosen to stick to key issues of civil and human rights and the politics which surround it," said H. Alexander Robinson, chief executive officer. "But sometimes these types of issues tend to overlap and reach into arenas dealing with race and/or sexual orientation. From a personal perspective, I was shocked, sickened, and saddened to hear media accounts of savage dogfighting and the mistreatment and cruel handling of animals. But I was relieved when Michael Vick took full responsibility for his actions. My only wish is that the law in relation to Michael Vick's punishment is applied fairly regardless of his race or athlete status."

The NFL's first openly gay former player also weighed in.

"I think he's been crucified in a way no other athlete has been," said David Kopay, the former NFL player who came out in 1975. "I think it has to do with the vulnerability of animals."

It does, in fact, have everything to do with that vulnerability. The dogs involved were not there by choice, nor did they opt to for the injuries they endured, nor the executions by hanging, suffocation, electrocution or drowning through which many met their end.

Once Vick serves his time, you should expect the NFL to suspend him from play. How long is anybody's guess. NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell, following last week's plea agreement, suspended Vick indefinitely.

"I loved watching him play as a football player because of his incredible athletic ability," Kopay said of Vick. "He did seem to be a pretty good leader, but as a quarterback I'd have to put him way down the list: he lacked touch on his passes."

"I can't believe someone would be able to do something that stupid and that crass," Kopay added. "He's had other people around him who knew it was not the right thing to do – the immorality of it.

"I think he deserves to do some hard time, and the NFL will suspend him for lying to them. I have absolutely no desire to see Michael Vick play football again. However, everyone has a chance for redemption – except gay people, it would seem."

But if six years of planned cruelty, suffering, and death for visceral thrills and an opportunity to gamble can be reduced to a single year of prison time, then I'd say the penalties are insufficient. Give Vick and his fellow felons the sentences the law allows – then revisit those laws to up the ante for future offenders.