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Bloodsport and the Michael Vick Dogfighting Case:

A Critical Cultural Analysis

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A thesis

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the faculty of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts in Sociology

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by

Wil Massey

December 2012

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Dr. Paul Kamolnick

Keywords: Vick, Dogfighting, Bloodsport

## ABSTRACT

Bloodsport and the Michael Vick Dogfighting Case:

A Critical Cultural Analysis

by

Wil Massey

After law enforcement officials in Virginia found evidence of a dogfighting operation, the owner, National Football League star Michael Vick, became one of the most vilified figures in America for supporting a bloodsport that inflicts debilitating bodily harm on dogs. This thesis examines that case in light of the long human history of breeding fighting dogs for war and competitive entertainment. A content analysis was performed on a sample of news reports and opinion pieces that were published in three media outlets. Reactions to the Vick case illuminated strong popular opposition to dogfighting. Findings explore how strong anti-dogfighting views appeared in the publications while contrasting views were either criticized or ignored, and how the NFL sought to protect its tarnished image. Vick's notoriety opened the opportunity for animal rights organizations and activists opposing the bloodsport to argue for significant legal punishment.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

As a star quarterback in the National Football League (NFL) known for his unconventional style of play, Michael Vick became one of the league's most beloved players among fans. However, that all changed in 2007 when information surfaced indicating he was an integral part of a major dogfighting operation. On April 25, 2007, when investigators raided and searched a house owned by Vick in Smithfield, Virginia, they discovered overwhelming evidence that the property was serving as a factory-sized kennel for housing dogs and training them to fight. Evidence seized from the property included 54 American Pit Bull Terriers (US District Court 2007:18), a "rape stand," which is used to force overly aggressive female dogs to mate, "break sticks," which are used to pry the jaws of a dog off the body of an opponent, and treadmills that are used as part of the dogfighting training regimen (US District Court 2007:18).

On July 17, 2007, Vick and three other men were federally charged with "Conspiracy to Travel in Interstate Commerce in Aid of Unlawful Activities and to Sponsor a Dog in an Animal Fighting Venture" (US District Court 2007:1). Initially Vick pleaded "not guilty" to these charges, claiming he rarely visited the property and that the operation, known as "Bad Newz Kennels," was solely the work of colleagues who lived at the house. But after the other three defendants provided incriminating information to obtain reduced sentences, Vick admitted his guilt and eventually reached a plea bargain agreement of his own with prosecutors. Despite his plea, Vick received a 23-month jail sentence, which was longer than any of his accomplices. Although it was revealed that Vick was less involved in the daily activities of Bad Newz Kennels than the other three defendants due to his NFL commitments, the operation was completely funded by money from his football-related earnings.

Throughout the investigation of Bad Newz Kennels, it appeared that Vick was the major target of the federal authorities, who were perhaps making an example of him due to his celebrity. Animal rights activist groups such as the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA), the Humane Society of the United States, and People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) used this high profile case to gain exposure for their organizations and promote their agendas, which include eliminating the practice of dogfighting. As the Michael Vick dogfighting case unfolded, it became the top sports story of the summer of 2007, and dogfighting became a sensational topic in the mainstream media.

From the time the dogfighting allegations against Vick surfaced in late April of 2007 up until he was sentenced in December of the same year, the story received enormous coverage in the mainstream media and brought the issue of dogfighting to the forefront. While dogfighting is a bloodsport that has long been practiced in the U.S. and can be traced back centuries to its origins in the once popular European practices of bull and bear baiting, it is currently detested among members of America's dominant culture, where dogs are the most popular pets and commonly even referred to as "man's best friend." A tremendous amount of angry sentiment was directed toward Vick, the celebrity at the center of this high-profile dogfighting case, and many who followed the story in the media became increasingly upset as details of the operation emerged. A smaller number of people argued that Vick was being too harshly criticized and that dogfighting is a cultural practice with a following in certain American subcultures. They pointed out that some bloodsports and forms of animal cruelty are tolerated and even accepted in American society. Either way, this was a story that captivated the nation on many levels; droves of people followed the media coverage, which provoked strong feelings.

My aim in this thesis is to offer a critical analysis of the Michael Vick case. I lay the groundwork for this thesis by discussing the history of fighting dogs followed by a detailed description of the practice of dogfighting in America. I then present a content analysis of a small portion of the media coverage regarding the Vick case. My sample includes 115 news articles largely drawn from three news sources: USA Today, ESPN.com, and the Daily Press, a regional newspaper based in Vick's hometown of Newport News, Virginia. The study implements a technique known as Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to understand the meaning, motivations, and agendas behind the articles' content. Following the content analysis will be a discussion of the sociological issues surrounding the Vick case, including meanings attached to class, race, culture, and masculinity. Overall, the aim is to provide theoretical, historical, and thought-provoking analysis of a highly contentious news spectacle.

## CHAPTER 2

### A HISTORY OF FIGHTING DOGS: FROM WAR TO BLOODSPORT

The domestication of dogs by humans began over ten thousand years ago. Early domesticated dogs served various functions for humans: herding, hunting, protection, and companionship (Hirst n.d.). Once domestication became prevalent, humans began breeding dogs to bring out desired traits so that dogs could serve distinct purposes. As Dieter Fleig (1996:13) states, “[H]umans have engaged in breeding dogs for millennia and in the process have produced a multitude of breeds.” A dog whose bloodlines are composed of only one single breed is considered to be a “purebred,” meaning that it “is descended from ancestors of the same breed on both sides for several generations into the past and, when mated to another purebred animal of the same breed, will produce offspring of the same phenotype and genotype as itself” (Semencic 1984:209).

By selecting certain traits such as courage, aggressiveness, size, strength, speed, and body structure, many dog breeds were designed for the purpose of fighting. Although some early fighting dogs were bred to engage in physical encounters with specific “big game” animals such as bears, wild boar, bison, and wild bulls (usually for the purpose of hunting), a major impetus to selectively breed dogs to be adept fighters was to help one side gain an advantage on the battlefield in war. According to Mike Homan (1999:10) in *A Complete History of Fighting Dogs*, “The use of dogs in war is a custom as old as war itself.” Fleig (1996) further claims that fighting dogs determined the outcome of many battles throughout history and were used in war at least as far back as Babylonian times. “From 700 B.C. onwards, there are numerous references to the use of dogs in battle, particularly in Western Asia,” adds Homan (1999:10).

Fighting dogs were commonly employed in battle by many civilizations remembered for their ability to subdue and conquer others in war, including the Persians, Greeks, Romans, and British (Fleig 1996). In fact, the English Mastiff “seems to have been a highly popular war dog” throughout Europe until the 15th or 16th century, when the use of hand-held firearms became widespread (Homan 1999:10).

When used in battle, dogs were covered by flexible armor and wore “heavy metal” collars donned with deadly spikes and “curved knives” that “protruded at all angles” (Homan 1999:10). Like all renowned breeds of fighting dogs, dogs of war were extremely brave, and these sharp weapons gave them the ability to impale their handlers’ adversaries on the battlefield. Enemy soldiers on horseback and their horses were most vulnerable to such attacks, as war dogs could cut the legs of these animals and their riders with the knives from their collars (Fleig 1996). Moreover, the fighting ability of the breed(s) of dogs that participated in battle against a civilization’s rivals often played a significant role in determining the manner in which a conflict unfolded. Fighting dogs were therefore valued as battlefield assets and were once presented by prominent figures of one civilization to another in order to promote good will (Fleig 1996).

An important point in the history of fighting dogs begins with the Roman invasion of Great Britain in 43 A.D. According to Monica Villavicencio (2007), “[B]oth sides brought fighting dogs to the battlefield for the seven years of warfare that followed.” The breed of fighting dog used by the Romans was the Molossus, which originated in Greece (Homan 1999). Employed to fight on the side of the British were the “broad-mouthed” Mastiffs, a “fierce fighting” breed which had been brought over “before Christ” from Greece by Phoenician traders (Semencic 1984:23).<sup>1</sup> While it is believed that the British “broad-mouthed” Mastiffs were

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<sup>1</sup> The British Mastiffs may have been bred with the Alaunt, a breed of dog brought over from China, at various points throughout their history (Semencic 1984).

descendants of the Molossus, the British fighting dogs showed their superiority on the battlefield (Villavicencio 2007). Although the Britons were far outmatched by the Roman Empire, falling to the Romans in 50 A.D., the fighting ability of their “broad-mouthed” dogs made a deep impression on the victors (Homan 1999). Once Britain was under Roman occupation, several officers were ordered to commandeer as many Mastiffs as they could to send to Rome (Fleig 1996). When the Romans acquired these “broad-mouthed” dogs, they tested them against their own fighting dogs in matchups that were dominated by the Mastiffs. From there, they adopted the British Mastiff as their dog of war in place of Molossian dogs (Homan 1999). The British Mastiff essentially became the dog of war throughout Europe (Homan 1999), and were eventually exported from Rome to France, Spain, and other parts of the continent (Villavicencio 2007).

Of even greater importance to the history of dogfighting is the Roman’s use of the British Mastiffs for entertainment purposes. In Rome, “the dogs were sent to fight in the large combat arenas against lions, bears, bulls, and elephants, as well as two-legged gladiators” (Fleig 1996:60-1). The use of dogs to attack and fight against one or more animals or humans for sport can be defined as “baiting.” Baiting, in any of its forms, is considered to be a bloodsport, which can be defined as any activity of competitive nature regularly involving bloodshed or other debilitating bodily harm. According to Rhonda D. Evans and Craig J. Forsyth (1998:51), “the act of baiting animals against one another, for entertainment, has existed throughout history.” Prior to the Romans, baiting is known to have been a popular form of amusement among the Egyptians, Greeks, and other ancient civilizations (“Bull Baiting” n.d.). However, the Romans took baiting and other bloodsports to an unprecedented level, as masses of citizens were treated to gory, violent events involving human gladiators and variety of animals and weapons in large

arenas such as the Roman Colosseum and other amphitheatres. While these sadistic events were held for the amusement of the spectators, they also served the latent function of diverting the common folk from more serious matters of everyday life such as their economic standing and the rampant corruption within the Empire. Of further significance to the Roman occupation of Britain and its subsequent use of the “broad-mouthed” Mastiffs in the amphitheatres is the possibility that this was the first time English people witnessed any baiting sport, which would eventually become an important part of their culture.

It was during the Feudal era that baiting sports rose to prominence in Great Britain. Homan (1999:12) claims that “[a]s early as 1154, in the reign of Henry II, the baiting of bulls and bears with dogs was a popular amusement.” While bulls and bears were the animals most commonly baited against dogs, “[t]here is scarcely an animal capable of defending itself on which the bravery of the dog was not put to the test in Old England” (Fleig 1996:99). Baiting sports “took place in rope enclosures inside circular buildings, reminiscent of the old Roman amphitheatres” (“Bull Baiting” n.d.). This form of entertainment was introduced to the British by the landed aristocracy, because the lords and vassals held direct military control in the decentralized feudal system. Those who controlled estates also held authority over the individuals living within the boundaries of that land. Therefore, the landed aristocracy organized military endeavors and owned the animals necessary for waging war, such as horses and fighting dogs. Beyond the battlefield, noblemen used the English fighting dogs to protect their fortresses and assist in their hunts for wild game.

In baiting their fighting dogs against other animals, the British elite began using these creatures that served practical functions for entertainment purposes. The baiting bloodsports quickly caught on among the landed aristocracy and were soon patronized by royalty. Baiting

became a popular pastime throughout Western Europe, as “[a]ccounts exist of fights between dogs and bulls throughout the Middle Ages up to the 19th century” (Fleig 1996:78) in Germany, France, Spain, Portugal, and Holland. Yet the British “pursued it with an earnestness which was barely known elsewhere in the world” (Homan 1999:14; Semencic 1984).

Bull baiting and bear baiting both became fashionable forms of entertainment among the British upper class in the 13th century. Baiting normally involved tying the larger animal to a post in order to limit the ground it could cover while it was forced to defend itself against two attacking dogs (Fleig 1996; Homan 1999). Occasionally the baited animal was attacked by more than two dogs, the bear sometimes wore a muzzle, and in some situations the bull or bear was unconfined by a rope (only in arenas where spectators were safe) (Homan 1999).

While the popularity of these bloodsports was initially confined to royalty and the nobility, their appeal soon spread to the common folk (Fleig 1996; Homan 1999). This pattern played out in a manner that exemplifies Thorstein Veblen’s “Theory of the Leisure Class” in that bull and bear baiting initially grew popular among the elite but eventually became, in the words of Veblen, “incumbent among all classes in the lower scale” (cited in Evans, Gauthier, and Forsyth 1998:828). As Homan (1999:14) explains, “These ‘sports,’ generally encouraged by English sovereigns and their Courts, enjoyed also the universal patronage of middle and lower orders of society.” Fleig (1996:65) similarly states that “What was considered entertainment at the royal courts, and a special honor for foreign guests, was carried over to the common folk through the commercial animal fights. The authorities have always understood that they must give the commoners...bread and games...to take their minds off their miserable social position.” Furthermore, life for the serfs and peasantry of Medieval England was short, cruel, and difficult, and religious leaders encouraged them to believe that they would be rewarded in the afterlife for

faithfully accepting their subservient roles on Earth (Hull 1989). “The animal fights provided a welcomed diversion” for the poorly educated common folk (Fleig 1996:66), distracting them from their numerous troubles and disadvantages.

In this time before the introduction of human-centered sports, bull and bear baiting became prominent national sports in Britain, and their popularity grew until the 16th or 17th century (Fleig 1996; Homan 1999). Aside from the church, which actually supported such practices more than it condemned them, these bloodsports became the center of community life (Fleig 1996). Nearly every locality had a ring where bull and bear baits were commonly held (“Bull Baiting” n.d.). Each event was a “public festival” of sorts which was attended by citizens of all ages and backgrounds (Fleig 1996:67). Part of the allure of the baiting sports can perhaps be explained by the “typical English passion for gambling” (which predates all baiting sports) based on the outcome of these encounters (Fleig 1996:55).

Perhaps the most well-known avid follower of bull and bear baiting in Britain was Queen Elizabeth I, the nation’s monarch from 1558 to 1603 (Fleig 1996; Homan 1999; “Elizabethan Bear and Bull Baiting” n.d.). Elizabeth I bred fighting Mastiffs and loved watching her dogs bait other animals (Fleig 1996). Homan (1999:10) further claims that British “foreign policy of the 16th century was very much influenced by the English Mastiff” because of documented instances of foreign leaders and ambassadors enjoying bull and bear baiting events held by Elizabeth I upon their visits to England. The popularity of baiting sports in Britain peaked during the reigns of Elizabeth I and her successor, King James I (1603-1625), who “further promoted these animal fights” (Fleig 1996:53). Fleig (1996:54) notes that “[a] number of Bear Gardens” (the euphemism for baiting arenas) “were built in London” while they held the throne. The practice of baiting sports continued through the 17th century despite a ban during the

Cromwell Protectorate regime that ruled Britain from 1653 to 1659 (“Oliver Cromwell” n.d.). Led by Oliver Cromwell, the Puritans who seized power following the English Civil War “banned the animal fights” (Fleig 1996:54-55). However, “[a]fter the Restoration” of 1660, when the former establishment returned to power, “these fights were revived to even greater popularity, and found more and more followers, particularly among the masses” (Fleig 1996:54-55).

While bull and bear baiting were both highly popular forms of entertainment, bull baiting became the more common of the two over time for a number of reasons. First, Britain’s bear population was significantly reduced as a result of the animal’s death rate in the baiting ring, which caused the price of bears to become increasingly expensive. Because “the valuable bears were needed for many fights” (Fleig 1996:55), fights were structured to the disadvantage of dogs, which were considered to be more expendable. Second, bull baiting was believed by the British people of this pre-enlightenment era to serve a practical function beyond the entertainment of the citizenry. According to Fleig (1996:66), “people had the idea that because of the excitement and exertions, the bull’s blood boiled, which made the meat all the more tasty.” In fact, it was required by law in parts of England that a bull be baited before its slaughter due to this unfounded belief. As stated on the website bulldoginformation.com (n.d.), the butchers in many towns were liable to face substantial fines “if they sold the flesh of a bull in the market without having the animal baited on the previous market day. The reason for this was that the flesh of a baited bull was universally considered more tender and nutritious.” Consequently, bull baiting came to be practiced more often than bear baiting due to the much greater availability of bulls along with their expendability. Because baited bulls would be slaughtered soon after,

whether or not they sustained life threatening injuries in the ring was of no concern to their owners.

The breed of dogs most commonly used for baiting bulls was the English Mastiff (Fleig 1996; “Bull Baiting” n.d.). However, any dog that proved to be proficient in fighting against bulls was given the functional label of “bulldog” (Semencic 1984). Dogs used as bull baiters were trained to grab the bull by its nose, the most sensitive and vulnerable part of the animal’s body, and pin its head to the ground (Fleig 1996; Homan 1999; Semencic 1984). When a dog was able to get a bull in this position while gripping tightly to its nose, the bull was “virtually helpless” (Fleig 1996:62). When baited, the bull’s goal was to gore the charging dog with its horns, which often sent the canine flying through the air. Thus, the animal that was able to mount an attack lowest to the ground had the advantage in such events if it could evade the bull’s lowered horns (Homan 1999).

Although the Mastiff’s ferocity, power, intensity, courage, and size made it a great fighter, they came to be seen as “too heavily built” and “too slow and cumbersome in the ring” for the demands of bull baiting (“Bull Baiting” n.d.). As a result, fighting dogs were increasingly bred for bull combat (Fleig 1996). In his *Standard Guide to Purebred Dogs*, Harry Glover (1977) explains, “[T]here is no doubt that by continuous selective breeding for shorter and shorter legs the [old English] Bulldog was produced” (quoted in Semencic 1984: 22). This newly developed breed of the late 16th and early 17th century was given the descriptive title of “Bulldog” (known today as the old English Bulldog) (Semencic 1984). Due to its “low-slung” build and its added jaw strength derived from its pronounced lower jaw, the Bulldog could attack the bull at a lower point than its predecessors and pin it more effectively (Fleig 1996:62).

Not only did the dogs used in bull baiting continue to become more adept in their trade as the bloodsport evolved, but the treatment of these animals “degenerated more and more” (Fleig 1996:78), as humans continued to explore new limits of inhumane treatment for the selfish purposes of amusement and profit. Fleig (1996:78) explains, “There are countless accounts of the cruelty against bulls and dogs. The front hooves of the bulls were chopped off, to see how they could ward off dogs on their bloody stumps. If they were exhausted from the fight, boiling water was poured in their ears to make them lively again.” Animal handlers practiced additional cruel attempts to enrage bulls, such as rubbing salt on wounds, blowing pepper or gunpowder in their nostrils, lighting fires underneath them, and lacerating their flesh so that it could be exposed to some form of irritant (Fleig 1996; Homan 1999). Also, breeders of Bulldogs would sometimes whip their dogs while they were latched onto the bulls to demonstrate their toughness to on-looking potential customers (Fleig 1996). The practice of bull baiting increasingly displayed the cruel potential of humankind.

While the baiting sports continued to enjoy a tremendous following, a new form of dogfighting entertainment emerged in Britain during the 17th century. Homan (1999:62) claims that matching two fighting dogs against each other in combat “commenced in England in the mid-1600s, and was a popular pastime during the reign of James II” (1685-88). Although “the history of dogfighting is certainly one that has not been very well documented” (Semencic 1984:21; Evans and Forsyth 1998), it is possible to provide some integral accounts of the bloodsport’s developments in Britain and the United States. According to one source (Coleman 2008), dogfighting began in Britain as an attempt by the landed aristocracy to test the effectiveness of specific dogs in protecting people and property but soon evolved into a form of sport and amusement. Dogfighting continued to rise in popularity throughout the 1700s and

began to flourish in the century's latter half (Homan 1999), which was "precisely the time when royalty was beginning to withdraw its support from the baiting sports" (Evans and Forsyth 1998:51). Homan (1999:38) explains, "By the end of the 18th century, royalty and many of the rich had lost interest in bull-baiting," and stopped enforcing bull baiting as a precursor to butchering.

Just before the turn of the 19th century, the practice of bull baiting remained more common among the masses than dog fighting. Dogfighting then grew more prevalent as many breeders selected dogs to fight against other dogs instead of bulls. In doing this, "terrier blood was crossed into the Bulldog breed" in order to produce a quicker, more agile dog (Fleig 1996:86). As Semencic (1984) explains:

[I]n the beginning it was the Bulldog that was employed in this activity [dogfighting], but it wasn't long before dogfighters realized that although the heavy (80-100 lb.) Bulldog was an excellent combatant when matched against a bull, a lighter, faster dog was more useful as a combatant in a fight against another dog. To achieve this end, the Bulldog was crossed with a variety of game terriers. (P. 36)

This led to a new breed of dog initially known as the Bull and Terrier (Fleig 1996; Semencic 1984). Terriers were most likely crossbred with Bulldogs due to their "generally rugged body structure," speed, aggression, and "highly developed gameness," and English and Irish owners fought them against other dogs in the bloodsport's early days (Semencic 1984:237). However, it seems to be an issue of debate as to what type(s) of terriers were bred with the old English Bulldogs to produce this new breed of fighter. Joseph L. Colby (1936) claims that it was the old English White Terrier that the Bull and Terrier is descended from while Rhonda D. Evans and Craig J. Forsyth (1998) contend that its ancestor is the Rat Terrier. Semencic (1984), as previously stated, holds that a variety of terriers produced the Bull and Terrier.

Once the Bull and Terrier breed was created, dogfighting became enormously popular throughout Britain, as the tenacious, attacking fighting style of the “newer gladiator” made the bloodsport “much more interesting to the spectator” (Fleig 1996:86). For bloodsport enthusiasts, the action-packed brand of fighting produced by the Bull and Terrier was thrilling to observe. By combining the power, jaw strength, and courage of the Bulldog with the speed, endurance, aggressiveness, and gameness of the terrier, a new breed of fighting dog had been created that could “engage in voracious combat for hours” (Coleman 2008:105) and would often battle to the death. The Bull and Terrier was characterized as bloodthirsty, with an innate fighting instinct and a natural inclination to attack the throat of its opponent. Its warrior-like qualities were admired widely in 19th century Britain. “Among the aristocracy themselves sheer physical courage, the willingness to face danger unflinchingly and endure pain stoically... was one of the most prized manly qualities” states historian Norman Gash (1979:42). Men from the lower classes embraced these traits to endure working long hours in dangerous and rigorous occupations such as mining and factory production. For them, life was about honor, defined as showing “courage, gameness, and fighting spirit. The manner of meeting death was also important to these men. It was only acceptable to go down fighting; this was as vital as victory” (Homan 1999:87).

In Britain, dogfighting’s popularity peaked between 1816 and 1860 (Fleig 1996). “In London, it was a [favorite] recreation among butchers, costermongers, watermen and the like” claims Homan (1999:63), who adds that “the sport was probably even more popular in parts of the Midlands and the North of England, especially among the expert dog breeders and handlers of the coal towns” (Homan 1999:63). Thus, it appears that dogfighting was most prevalent during this time in England’s industrial midland counties, which were collectively known as the

Black Country. Dogfighting was particularly prominent in the Black Country's landlocked coal and iron mining county of Staffordshire, where the new Bull and Terrier breed came to be known as the Staffordshire Bull Terrier (Semencic 1984).

Meanwhile, broader social changes took place in Britain throughout the late 18th century and early part of the 19th century due to rapid industrialization (Russell 2007). During the Industrial Revolution, England shifted from an agrarian-based economy of agricultural production to an industrial and manufacturing-based economy. Technological innovations made possible the mass production of goods in factories, allowed numerous tasks to be performed more efficiently, and created new horizons for human ingenuity. The Industrial Revolution changed nearly every aspect of life for the British across all social classes.

The Industrial Revolution prompted urbanization (Storch 1976). Many individuals who formerly worked as agricultural laborers were forced to relocate in order to find work in factories. This fostered centralization, and the growth of industrial cities throughout the nation, including the Black Country, which had previously been exclusively rural countryside (Russell 2007). Urbanization played a fairly significant role in the rising popularity of dogfighting in Britain, as many new industrial laborers had been enthusiasts of the baiting sports. According to Edmund Russell (2007), "They retained their love for blood sports but lacked the space and free days for baits of large animals." While a large arena or vast open space was needed for bull baiting, dogfights took place in a "pit," which was a square ring usually no bigger than 20 feet by 20 feet with walls normally ranging from two to four feet high (Forsyth and Evans 1998; Gibson 2005). Dogfights could thus be held indoors and at night under artificial light (Russell 2007). On a grander level, the Industrial Revolution in England during the early part of the 18th century transformed power relations among citizens and substantially altered social class dynamics.

History professor Norman R. West (n.d.) explains that “The Industrial Revolution had not only produced an exploited working class, but had also created a variety of middle class jobs, such as retail shop owners, warehouse managers, people involved in transportation of goods, and highly skilled engineers.” Furthermore, the rise of industrial capitalism in Britain diminished the economic influence of the landed aristocracy in favor of industrialists, merchants, and the emerging middle class. The nation’s shift from a largely agrarian society marked a transfer of control of the means of production from the aristocracy to the bourgeoisie.

Despite the altered mode of production brought on by technological innovations, political reform was slow to come (Russell 2007). The British government, which was controlled by the aristocracy, was resistant to change and unresponsive to contemporary issues (Russell 2007). During this time, politics in England were dominated by two major parties known as the Tories and the Whigs. The Tories were the nation’s conservative incumbent party, made up of the aristocracy. The Whigs were the “progressive” party of the era, and largely represented the industrialists and merchants (Gash 1979). While the nation’s economic power had come to rest in the hands of the industrialists and merchants, they had a difficult time making political gains primarily due to the voting laws of the time, which allowed only wealthy landowners the right to vote, who constituted only a small percentage of the population.

Although Tories desperately clung to their political power, the pendulum officially began to swing in 1830 when the Whig party gained a majority in the House of Commons (Russell 2007). Whigs won the passage of the Reform Bill of 1832, which realigned the Parliamentary electoral districts to reflect the recent population shifts and granted suffrage to middle class men (perhaps in order to assure that the Whigs would not be forced to relinquish their newly gained political power in the foreseeable future) (Gash 1979). The subsequent transfer of political

power from the House of Lords (made up of life-appointed aristocrats) to the House of Commons soon led to the passage of more reform laws, many of which were designed to improve the working conditions of the proletariat (perhaps to curb growing unrest and prevent revolts), such as the Mines Act and the Ten Hours Act (Gash 1979).

Not only did the Industrial Revolution drastically alter the British power structure and reshape the nation's political agenda, it also triggered other forms of social and cultural change. In particular, beliefs about the treatment of animals began to change. As Russell (2007) explains, "Few people [during Agrarian times] were shocked by the gore [of baiting sports] because the rich and poor alike made their living by raising animals for the slaughter." Thus, most British citizens were desensitized to the inherent violence of such bloodsports partly because they were accustomed to killing animals, often in a rather gory manner, and animal suffering was a normalized part of their everyday lives. With urban industrialization, city dwellers lost contact with animal slaughter and popularized dogs as pets. The cultural and lifestyle changes initiated by the Industrial Revolution marginalized animal fighting, as new middle class citizens sought to ban such practices. Animal fighting sports were not a part of the lives of the industrialists and merchants who had recently risen to power in England, and therefore these groups, at the very least, had no interest in preserving their legality.

While the House of Commons discussed the idea of banning bull baiting in 1802 ("Bull Baiting" n.d.), "efforts failed because power rested with the rural aristocracy" (Russell 2007). In 1835, after the Reform Bill of 1832 realigned the parliamentary districts and gave voting rights to the middle class, the House of Commons easily passed the Humane Act, which formally banned bull baiting, bear baiting, and dogfighting (Evans and Forsyth 1998; Fleig 1996; Russell 2007; Semencic 1984). After the law's passage, some members of the rural aristocracy kept

practicing baiting sports, dogfighting, and cockfighting (which was banned in 1849). Miners and factory workers of the Black Country also continued to stage popular dogfights. Neither the rural aristocracy nor the working class held influence in terms of economic power or legal authority. Thus, the change in legal status of these practices, regardless of their moral standing, was the result of a political power struggle.

Although bull and bear baiting gradually declined until they disappeared completely, “the official ban of all fights...actually served to promote dogfighting” in Britain (Fleig 1996: 86). While the baiting sports could only be carried out in a conspicuous manner, dogfighting could be practiced underground “[b]ecause of the small amount of space required for the pit” (Fleig 1996:86). Thus, the ban on dogfighting proved difficult to enforce as its popularity caught hold among baiting enthusiasts, who viewed it as the most practical avenue to fulfill their appetite for violent entertainment (Fleig 1996). Dogfighting continued to flourish in Britain up until around 1860. “After that the police slowly began to eliminate the fights,” claims Fleig (1996:86). However, cases of dogfighting were investigated only periodically and punished sporadically, often with little jail time (Homan 1999). Moreover, some were unwilling to let criminal penalties thwart their passion for the activity; although dogfighting grew less common in Britain after 1860, it continued to attract a following in some circles for quite some time. This is evidenced by an account around the 1900s that “fighting dogs were still advertised for sale in English newspapers...” along with “...a listing of all their wins in dogfights” (Fleig 1996:86).

Dogfighting’s popularity in the Old World extended to the New World. Baiting sports and dogfighting were brought to America by settlers from Great Britain and later Ireland. “There is evidence that baiting sports were being practiced [in the colonies] as early as 1726, if not earlier,” claim Evans and Forsyth (1998:52, see also Forsyth and Evans 1998:210). The

American Society for the Prevention and Cruelty for Animals (ASPCA) states that “there are historical accounts of dog fights going back to the 1750s” in the US (“Dog Fighting FAQ” n.d.). Furthermore, according to Hylton (2009), “Dogfighting, along with bear baiting, cock fighting, gander pulling, and other blood sports were quite popular in colonial Virginia and helped to unite individuals of different races and economic classes, including slaves and their masters.”

Regardless of where in the U.S. the practice originated, American dogfighting probably has its greatest legacy in the South. Fighting dogs have long been revered in Southern culture, and the Bulldog remains a symbol of Southern heritage to this day, as signified by the fact that the breed serves as a mascot for many schools in America’s southeast, including the University of Georgia, Mississippi State University, Louisiana Tech University, South Carolina State University, Alabama A&M, the Citadel, Gardner-Webb University, Samford University, Tennessee Wesleyan College, and James Madison University (Griesemer 2009). Although various bloodsports were previously practiced by the Southern colonists, dogfighting emerged as a common form of entertainment during the antebellum era and continued to flourish for decades after the Civil War (Evans et al. 1998). The 17th and 18th century South was, in many ways, similar to medieval England in that both were agrarian societies where much of the farming took place on large estates. Moreover, the economic system during this time in the US South could accurately be classified as feudal, as the power rested in the hands of the aristocratic plantation owners who controlled the lives of, and in many cases legally owned, those who worked the land. For the slaves of African descent, this was a caste system forcing them into a life of servitude. Although slaves were freed in by the 13th Amendment in 1865, a basic system of oppression and exploitation remained in place. Also reminiscent of preindustrial Britain was that

the commonly practiced bloodsports, such as dogfighting, were popularized and deemed fashionable by the landed aristocracy (Evans et al. 1998).

Dogfighting began to gain popularity not only in the South but throughout the United States in 1817, “when the Staffordshire Bull Terrier was brought to this country” (Coleman 2008:105; Fleig 1996). Soon after the breed’s arrival, the activity became as widespread in America as it was in Britain (Fleig 1996). The rise in prominence of dogfighting can be further explained by the fact that millions of Northern Europeans from England and Ireland, where dogfighting had a strong working-class following, immigrated to the US from the 1820s through the 1880s (Homan 1999:200; Evans and Forsyth 1998). Homan (1999) points out that these immigrants included “men from England’s Black Country, the industrial midland counties. Many of their fathers, grandfathers, and great-grandfathers had fought dogs; it was a way of life not easily given up” (Homan 1999:200). As America’s northeastern states become industrialized during the second half of the 19th century, British and Irish immigrants entered the U.S. in much greater numbers, which greatly contributed to dogfighting’s growing popularity following the Civil War (Coleman 2008; “Dog Fighting FAQ” n.d.).

While dogfighting was certainly a popular form of entertainment among some circles in the mid-19th century, it also faced opposition in various parts of the U.S. from individuals and groups who influenced policymakers to outlaw the practice. As a result, the bloodsport “was illegal in most states by the 1860s” (Coleman 2008:105; Favre 2011), although the enforcement of such laws and punishments for violating them varied widely from county to county (Evans and Forsyth 1998). Dogfighting perhaps faced its greatest opposition in the city of New York, where numerous bloodsports were commonly practiced by newly arrived immigrants. Immigrant men and women with little or no education had difficulty obtaining employment; whatever work

they were able to find was often temporary, dangerous, arduous, and low paying. Homan (1999:201) further explains, “The rougher elements hung around bar-rooms. They frequented the sporting halls where cock-fights were staged, dogs were pitted against each other, and rat ‘worries’ were held. Saloons and pool-rooms [harbored] an army of discontented men ready for anything that promised to satisfy their thirst for amusement” while hopefully winning some money.<sup>2</sup>

Possibly due in part to the strong resentment and distrust of recent immigrants, or perhaps out of sincere disapproval of animal cruelty, New York legislators passed laws against dogfighting, cockfighting, and rat killing competitions in 1856 (Evans and Forsyth 1998). A decade later, a charter for incorporation was granted by the New York state legislature for the incorporation of the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) (Homan 1999). The organization was founded by Henry Bergh, a “pioneer and propagandist for the humane treatment of animals” (Homan 1999:201). After inheriting wealth from his father, a successful shipbuilder, at a fairly young age, Bergh dedicated his life to the prevention of animal cruelty. He strongly opposed baiting sports and dogfighting and used his organization to raise awareness of these practices, pass animal rights laws and stiffer penalties for those who violated them, and increase the enforcement of such statutes (Evans and Forsyth 1998; Homan 1999). Ironically, Bergh’s efforts may have actually aided the spread of dogfighting initially because the negative exposure he created allegedly contributed to the increased popularity and mystique of the practice. Also working against Bergh at this time was the fact that the bloodsport was patronized by New York City police officers and members of the upper class (Evans and Forsyth 1998; Homan 1999).

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<sup>2</sup> A “rat worry” is a contest of which dog can kill the most rats within a certain amount of time.

Out of this context emerged what many believe to be the ultimate canine warrior. Upon being brought to America, the Staffordshire Bull Terrier continued to be selectively bred for gameness along with the accentuation of other desirable traits, which eventually led to the creation of what would eventually become known as the American Pit Bull Terrier (originally known simply as the Pit Bull Terrier). As stated by Forsyth and Evans (1998:204), “The pit bull is unique in his absence of threat displays when fighting.” It is extremely uncommon for this breed to bare its teeth or raise the hair on its back, and it never growls or barks when engaged in combat (Forsyth and Evans 1998; Semencic 1984).

For years the American Kennel Club (AKC), the preeminent dog breeders club in the US, refused to recognize the Pit Bull Terrier due to the breed’s strong association with dogfighting (Semencic 1984). However, the AKC did recognize a breed known as the American Staffordshire Terrier (AST), which is also a direct offshoot of the Staffordshire Bull Terrier. While the American Staffordshire Terrier, like the Pit Bull Terrier, is a larger breed than the Staffordshire Bull Terrier, the AST is bred to accentuate certain physical characteristics for show, which gives it a broader head and chest than the Pit Bull Terrier (Semencic 1984). In sum, the AST is bred for show while the Pit Bull Terrier is bred to be as great a fighter as possible. However, Semencic (1984) claims they are essentially the same dog and would soon end up indistinguishable if the AST were bred for fighting.

Interestingly, however, another breeders association known as the United Kennel Club (UKC) was founded in 1898 in order to recognize the Pit Bull Terrier as a breed and allow the fighting dogs to be registered (Semencic 1984). At the time of its inception, the UKC was a major proponent of dogfighting, helping establish rules for the bloodsport and providing referees for fights (Gibson 2005). Although the organization is still active, it has long denounced the

practice of dogfighting and only recognizes the pit bull breed for show purposes (Senencic 1984). As a result, numerous other kennel clubs have emerged with the intention of preserving and constantly improving the superior fighting traits of the American Pit Bull Terrier (Semencic 1984).

Throughout the latter half of the 1800s and into the 20th century, dogfighting was tolerated by many Americans and stayed popular among certain circles of men, including some elites and respected public officials (Evans et al. 1998; Gladwell 2009). The bloodsport is believed to have peaked in popularity in the US in the 1940s but was subsequently driven underground by law enforcement and animal rights advocates and organizations (Fleig 1996). It was banned in all states by 1976, when Congress passed the Federal Animal Welfare Act (Semencic 1984). Since then, state laws against dogfighting have stiffened and greater resources have been allocated to its elimination (Gibson 2008). It is now a felony in all 50 U.S. states to fight dogs against one other (Tobias 2008). In addition, the Animal Fighting Prohibition Enforcement Act was signed into action in May of 2007 by President George W. Bush in order to stiffen federal penalties for interstate dogfighting operations and to grant law enforcement greater authority to stop the practice (Tobias 2008).

Despite the fact that mainstream Americans have grown increasingly intolerant of dogfighting and lawmakers favor prosecuting those involved, the bloodsport has not only survived but by most accounts is actually gaining in popularity. For instance, deputy manager for the Animal Cruelty Campaign for the Humane Society John Goodwin states, “I believe that dogfighting is on the upswing” (Naqi 2007). Changes in how dogfighting is perceived and dealt with in America have pushed it to become more clandestine. In addition, the practice of dogfighting has become much more common over the past few decades among African-

American urban black youth who identify with Hip hop culture. For many of these individuals, the increased legal penalties matter little except to symbolize an “establishment punishment leveled against the disenfranchised” (Peters 2008). The bloodsport also continues to thrive throughout the world and appears to have significant followings in Latin America, Afghanistan, Italy, Russia, South Africa, England, Australia, Japan, and Canada (Gibson 2005). Dogfighting is even legal in some nations such as Honduras and Japan and is a tradition that has been practiced for quite some time by various cultures (Gibson 2005). Thus, it seems obvious that this bloodsport will certainly continue into the foreseeable future regardless of the efforts of those who oppose it to end the practice.

## CHAPTER 3

### A DESCRIPTION OF CONTEMPORARY DOGFIGHTING

Dogfighting is defined by Evans et al. (1998:827) as “the act of baiting two dogs against one another for entertainment or gain. It involves placing two dogs in a pit until one either quits or dies.” The size of a dogfighting pit typically ranges from 12-20 feet and is surrounded by walls between two and four feet high and usually made of wood (Forsyth and Evans 1998; Gibson 2005). The surface of the pit is normally made up of carpet or dirt (Burke 2007). Individuals who own, train, and/or handle fighting dogs in the pit are referred to in the trade as “dogmen” (Forsyth and Evans 1998:203). Ninety-nine percent of the dogs employed in the bloodsport of dogfighting in the US are American Pit Bull Terriers (APBT) (Semencic 1984; Naqi 2007). Different breeds are used in other nations where dogfighting is popular. For instance, the Tosa, which “resembles a tightly held-together English Mastiff with an especially broad skull,” is the preeminent fighting dog of Japan (Semencic 1984:132). The Dogo Argentino is commonly used for fighting throughout Latin America (“Fighting Dog Breeds” n.d.), and the dogs normally used for fighting in Afghanistan are Mastiffs (Shah and Gall 2008).

Still, the APBT “is indisputably the most effective fighting dog ever developed” (Semencic 1984:131). As Semencic (1984:131) explains, “In fights staged between 50-pound Pit Bulls and others of the fighting breeds weighing in at well over a hundred pounds, the results are consistently the same. At best the larger dog will dominate the match for 15-20 minutes until its stamina is gone and its lack of gameness becomes obvious.” The fight will predictably be dominated by the APBT after that. The gameness of the APBT is unmatched by any other breed; gameness is the most valued trait in a fighting dog among dogmen of most cultures (Evans and

Forsyth 1998; “History of Dog Fighting” 1997). “Gameness” is defined by Jones as “an awesome persistence that flows out of an invincible will” (cited in Evans et al. 1998: 831). Moreover, gameness can be described as a dog’s desire or willingness to keep fighting regardless of the situation (Semencic 1984; “History of Dog Fighting” 1997). A dog that is “game” will continue to attack its opponent despite being injured or overmatched, and a dog that is willing to fight to the death is referred to in dogfighting circles as “dead game” (Evans and Forsyth 1998) or, perhaps less commonly, “deep game” (Semencic 1984). A dog that is dead game is considered to be “the ultimate canine warrior,” and therefore highly desirable (Evans and Forsyth 1998:66). Consequently, fighting dogs that prove to be dead game are most preferred as breeding stock (Semencic 1984). While physical attributes that allow dogs to develop superior fighting skills are also taken into consideration when breeding for success in the pit, gameness is clearly the most respected and sought after trait.

APBTs that are considered to be well-bred for fighting are also said to be incredibly loyal to their owners (Semencic 1984; Colby 1936). Although the breed itself has long been praised for its unconditional loyalty (Colby 1936; Semencic 1984), Semencic (1984) asserts that there is a non-coincidental positive correlation between gameness and loyalty. Semencic (1984:66) explains, “[T]his gameness involves more than just a desire to fight to the death if need be. It also involves an intense desire to please a master who wants to see the dog continue to attack at all costs. Pit men understand this desire to please on the part of the dog and capitalize on it.” As evidence of this claim, Semencic (1984) points out that in fights, dogmen keep themselves visible while cheering their dog to trigger its gameness. Therefore, Semencic (1984:68) argues, “This process of selectively breeding dogs that display [gameness] has produced an entire category of dogs intensely devoted to their owners.” If Semencic’s claim is true, the APBT

could be considered the most exploited breed of dogs in existence. Many dogmen, however, simply believe that the typical APBT loves to fight and will do so without coaxing regardless of the desire of his/her handler (Forsyth and Evans 1998; Semencic 1984).

On the other end of the dogfighting spectrum from canines that are dead game are those labeled as “curs.” “Curs” are dogs that behave cowardly and shy away from combat (Evans et al. 1998). Curs lack what dogmen consider to be acceptable levels of aggressiveness, courage, and/or gameness. Dogs bred for fighting demonstrate cur behavior by refusing to attack other dogs, running away from an attacker, or giving up in the pit when facing adversity. Moreover, dogmen disparage curs as “poor reflections of the sport” and therefore as expendable (Evans et al. 1998:832). Insiders view them and their owners as a disgrace to the bloodsport. The use of curs as breeding stock is thus forbidden by breeders of fighting dogs, and many of these underperforming dogs are executed or abandoned (“History of Dog Fighting” 1997).

Dogfights in rural areas normally take place in barns and fields (Evans and Forsyth 1998) while those in urban areas generally occur in abandoned buildings, warehouses, basements, and garages (Gibson 2005). A match between two dogs is referred to in American dogfighting circles as a “show.” Events occur in seclusion because the bloodsport has grown progressively clandestine over the past half century in response law enforcement (Evans and Forsyth 1998; Burke 2007). For each fight, two sides agree to match dogs on a specific date. Each side also puts up an agreed upon amount of money, as gambling among dogmen and spectators is integral to organized dogfighting. The sum of the money put up by each side is known as the “purse” (Evans and Forsyth 1998). While purses for dogfights have been known to be as high as \$100,000 (“Dogfighting a Booming Business” 2007), and the mean dogfighting purse is claimed to be \$10,000 by espn.com (Naqi 2007), the median dollar figure for a purse is probably

significantly lower, between \$800 and \$7,000 (Evans and Forsyth 1998). At the end of the fight, the purse goes to the side of the victorious dog. However, the winning side pays the referee, who is selected by consensus in the negotiations for the fight, generally around 10 percent of the purse (Evans and Forsyth 1998). During negotiations the sides agree upon a fighting weight for each dog that cannot be exceeded. Both sides agree on an amount of money, known as a “forfeit,” that will have to be paid by one side to the other as a penalty for their dog coming in overweight (Evans and Forsyth 1998). In addition, the fighting agreement is voided by the side whose dog exceeds its negotiated weight limit. In some cases a new contract is drawn up where the dogs will still fight but under revised terms; frequently fights go forward under the original agreement with the forfeit charge factored in (Semencic 1984). According to Evans and Forsyth (1998), a common forfeit for a fight carrying a \$3,000 dollar purse would be \$500.

The entire process of getting a fighting dog ready for a show takes up to two years (Burke 2007). When a litter of puppies is bred for fighting, it is common for the ones who display the most aggression at an early age to receive the greatest investment of time and resources. A dog’s first truly competitive fighting experience is known as a “roll,” an exhibition fight that lasts about 10 minutes, to test its gameness, aggression, and ability (Semencic 1984; Burke 2007). Dogs are typically rolled when they are about 15 months old (Burke 2007). Dogs that show promise when rolled will be given another opportunity to demonstrate their fighting spirit around 19 months in a practice session that normally lasts close to an hour, and those that perform up to par will be trained for a prize fight against another handler’s dog (Burke 2007).

A dog in training for a show is referred to by dogmen as being “in the keep” (Burke 2007). The training regimen usually lasts about six weeks and involves regular exercise on a treadmill, swimming in a pool, and a special diet (Semencic 1984; Burke 2007). To gain an

edge, many dogmen prepare their dog for a fight through cruel and deplorable means. For instance, it is not uncommon for a trainer to use bait animals (kittens, cats, or smaller dogs) to motivate a dog by placing the animal in front of it while running on a treadmill. After its workout, the bait animal is often fed to the fighting dog to reward it and encourage its thirst for blood (Semencic 1984). Also, some dogmen inject their fighters with steroids, and others have been known to shave their dog's fur and add roach killer to its food in order to cause the fur that grows back to have a bitter taste that may repel an opponent (Burke 2007). Some handlers sharpen their dog's teeth, and a few have even been known to feed their dog a little gun powder to make it more insanely aggressive (Burke 2007). It is also common for dogmen to dehydrate their dogs a few days before a fight so that less blood will flow through combat wounds (Semencic 1984).

Just before the fight, each dog is washed by its opponent's handler to make sure its fur is not covered with any foreign substance such as nicotine sulfate that, when bitten into, could poison the other dog (Semencic 1984). Grain alcohol is often used to completely remove foreign substances (Burke 2007). The dogs are then taken to separate corners of the pit where they are held by their handlers behind what are known as "scratch lines" and then released when the referee yells, "Face your dogs" (Burke 2007). The animals then fight until one of them makes a "turn," which is a submissive gesture where a dog turns away from its opponent without attempting to make a move (Gibson 2005). Once this happens, the dogs are separated and then returned to their respective corners. The dog that turned must run over to the other side of the pit and cross the scratch line to attack its opponent when released by its handler upon the order of the referee (Gibson 2005). If the dog crosses the scratch line, it is said to have scratched, and its opponent is then released by the other handler, allowing the fight to continue (Gibson 2005). If

the dog that turned fails to scratch, the fight is over and the other dog is ruled the winner (Gibson 2005). As Gibson (2005) states, “The process of separating the dogs continues each time there is a turn or if both dogs fail to grab hold of each other for a specified amount of time.”

The set of rules widely adopted by serious dogmen in America is known as the “Cajun Rules” (Coleman 2008; Burke 2007). These rules are primarily designed to favor dogs that demonstrate the most gameness. This explains why fighting dogs are separated after one makes a turn, because breaking up the dogs and restarting the fight allows the dog previously at a disadvantage the opportunity to engage its opponent on equal footing if it is game enough to scratch. Dogfights under Cajun Rules do not have a time limit (Evans and Forsyth 1998), which means that the victory in a close fight often goes to the dog that refuses to quit. Most dogfights involving APBTs last anywhere from a half hour to five hours, depending largely on the gameness of the dogs and how well they are matched (Evans and Forsyth 1998).

Dogfights can end in five different ways under Cajun Rules. The most common ending is for a dog to fail to scratch, much less common is the death of one or both dogs (Evans and Forsyth 1998). Contests can also end when a dog’s handler stops the fight or when a dog jumps out the pit (Forsyth and Evans 1998). Jumping out of the pit is viewed as an extremely cowardly act, and any dog that does so will almost inevitably be executed by its owner (Evans and Forsyth 1998). Finally, a dogfight ends temporarily if it is broken up by the police, although Cajun Rules state that if such a situation presents itself the referee is to choose the venue where the fight will continue (Burke 2007).

Handlers fight male and female APBTs in contests for money although nearly all matches involve dogs of the same sex. A possible reason for this is weight, as male APBTs normally outweigh their female counterparts (Semencic 1984). A fighting career of a dog is referred to as

its “campaign”; and as dogs win fights, their opponents become more formidable and the purses grow (Burke 2007). A dog amassing three wins in the pit is known as a “champion,” and a fighter earning five wins without a loss is granted the honorable title of “grand champion” (Semencic 1984; Burke 2007). Dogs that succeed as fighters and demonstrate tremendous gameness usually end up being retired from fighting for breeding purposes. Grand champions with a strong pedigree can bring in thousands of dollars annually from the sale of puppies and semen (Semencic 1984; Burke 2007). According to the ASPCA, “The serious dog fighter is as familiar with the bloodlines of dogs as any thoroughbred aficionado is of Triple Crown contenders” (“Dog Fighting FAQ” n.d.). Evans and Forsyth (1998) assert that the most renowned breeders garner the greatest prestige in dogfighting circles.

Dogfighting is estimated to be nearly a half-billion dollar industry in the US (Gibson 2005; Burke 2007) and is believed to involve 250,000 dogs (Coleman 2008). The Humane Society of the United States claims that America is home to at least 40,000 fully committed dogmen who consider themselves “professionals” (Gibson 2005; “Dogfighting a Booming Business” 2007). It is further believed that an additional 100,000 people, mostly in urban areas, are involved in dogfighting on a less organized level, either as “enthusiasts” or as “streetfighters” (Peters 2008; “Dogfighting a Booming Business” 2007).

“Professionals,” the most serious and devout dogfighters, operate in national and sometimes international networks (Gibson 2005). They tend to own large numbers of scientifically bred dogs descended from pit legends (Gibson 2005). Professionals invest the most time and money in dogfighting, and many are among the most well connected, respected, and knowledgeable individuals in the bloodsport. Many publish and receive “trade” journals dedicated to dogfighting that provide helpful information, report results and accounts of recent

fights, and advertise sales of related items and puppies (Gibson 2005). In addition, professional dogfighters from across the world are linked together on the internet through various chat rooms and websites. A striking number of individuals involved in the bloodsport on this level, despite lacking conventional success in mainstream society, are untrained veterinary experts in medicine, first aid, exercise, and dietary nutrition (“Dog Fighting FAQ” n.d.).

While Michael Vick’s Bad Newz Kennels operation certainly had professional qualities given the amount of money invested and the number of dogs involved, it can also be argued that Vick was simply an “enthusiast.” Also referred to as “hobbyists,” enthusiasts are classified as mid-level participants in the bloodsport’s hierarchy (Gibson 2005). Such individuals normally fight dogs in a particular community or region (Gibson 2005). According to Gibson (2005), “There are both urban and rural networks of dogfighting enthusiasts and the fighting subcultures largely depend on the culture of the larger regional community.” In addition, a group of enthusiasts is often closely knit. There is typically a great deal of camaraderie among members, who develop lifelong friendships and fraternize regularly (Evans et al. 1998). Although some enthusiasts have criminal backgrounds (Gibson 2005), many are otherwise law abiding citizens who are not viewed as threats to social order (Evans et al. 1998). In fact, many dogmen on this level are actually highly respected members of the community such as judges, lawyers, police officers, and politicians (Evans et al. 1998; Burke 2007; Gibson 2005).

Considered to be at the bottom of the hierarchy of dogfighters are the “street fighters” (Gibson 2005; “Dogfighting a Booming Business” 2007). People who make up this group are considered by other insiders to be the least knowledgeable about the bloodsport. Nearly all of them live in urban areas and tend to fight their dogs only within their neighborhood/immediate vicinity (Peters 2008). They arrange most fights at the spur of the moment, stemming from

“playing the dozens,” trash talk, or verbal disputes between individuals. It is typical that street fighters engage their dogs in altercations without formal rules. Also, street fighters are normally much younger than those involved in dogfighting on an organized level (Peters 2008). Most are believed to be African American males who identify with Hip hop culture. It is the street fighters who are largely responsible for the recent rise in popularity of the bloodsport, and they are believed by many to be violent criminals who are involved in a myriad of illegal activities and often affiliated with gangs (Peters 2008). Street fighters are said to have only emerged in the past 15-20 years, and it is claimed that their dogs tend to be more aggressive toward humans as a result of poor training and breeding (“Dog Fighting FAQ” n.d). Most traditional dogfighters resent this emergence because they feel that street fighters bring unwanted negative attention to the bloodsport (“Dog Fighting FAQ” n.d). According to the professionals and enthusiasts, the street fighters do not go about fighting dogs in an educated or appropriate manner and are largely responsible for the increased attempts by law enforcement and animal rights organizations to eradicate the practice as well as movements in America to ban ownership of the APBT (“Dog Fighting FAQ” n.d).<sup>3</sup>

Dogfighting is, by all accounts, gaining in popularity while at the same time being met with more resistance (“Dogfighting a Booming Business” 2007). While many of those who strongly oppose the practice are intent on bringing it to an end, numerous others who are involved in dogfighting are dedicated to its survival (Evans et al. 1998). The practice of fighting dogs sparks contentious debates worldwide and is an issue of tremendous sociological intrigue due to the myriad of elements at play. Factors influencing the perception and legality of the bloodsport in various nations include class, economics, political power, culture, tradition,

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<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Stenross (1987) discusses the consensus among “sport shooters” that the reputation of their pastime has been tarnished by “gun nuts,” from whom they go to great lengths to distance themselves.

masculinity, and animal rights. Due to its complexity, the fighting of dogs promises to be an issue of conflict for quite some time.

## CHAPTER 4

### METHODS

The time span of the data for this analysis of content from articles related to the Michael Vick dogfighting case was from late April 2007, when evidence of a dogfighting operation on Vick's Smithfield, VA property was first uncovered by authorities, through December 2007, when Vick was formally sentenced by federal prosecutors for the charges which he pled guilty. This time frame was chosen because it was during these months that the case was one of the most covered and heatedly discussed topics in the mainstream American media.

The specific method of content analysis implemented in this study of media coverage of the Vick dogfighting case is known as critical discourse analysis (CDA). CDA focuses on the power of language as used by the media to subtly perpetuate dominant ideologies and sway public opinion (Wodak 2004). Language, or discourse, is a powerful tool of persuasion because the words chosen for delivering information can shape how an audience receives the news. Consequently, messages and political agendas are often conveyed through discourse. "Discursive practices," according to Wodak (2004:198), "can help produce and reproduce unequal power relations between...social classes, women and men, and ethnic/cultural majorities and minorities through the ways in which they represent things and position people." Because language may perpetuate inequality, CDA helps reveal meanings embedded in specific words. This method was found to be most relevant for the purposes of this study because issues of class, culture, race, and masculinity are all deeply connected to the topic of Vick's involvement in the bloodsport of dogfighting and the public discussions that followed. Through the use of CDA, this study focuses on the numerous power relations at play between dominant and disadvantaged

groups in American society that were brought to light in the Vick dogfighting case. Subscribing to the commonly held belief among critical conflict sociological theorists that a society's mainstream media operates to preserve and uphold the status quo (Macionis 2011), this study examines the content of articles in national and regional news sources.

To establish a data set for content analysis, I collected a convenience sample of 115 newspaper/internet articles that mentioned the Michael Vick case. The majority (110 articles) came from three different periodicals. Of these articles, 54 came from ESPN, 28 came from USA Today, and 28 came from a regional newspaper, the Daily Press, published in Newport News, VA. The remaining five articles were chosen for analysis because they provided further means for comparison. Moreover, these articles were included because they are what Patton (1990) refers to as "deviant cases" where contrasting or contradictory information. The sources of those five articles are The Washington Post, NPR, MSNBC, MTV.com, and Duke University's Office of News and Communications. The 115 articles were analyzed and coded for key themes and emergent concepts. Of the 54 ESPN articles analyzed, 49 were reported news and five were editorials. Eight of the 28 USA Today articles were editorials while the other 20 were reported news. All of the Daily Press articles were news reports. While USA Today and ESPN are geared to an American national audience, the Daily Press is based in Newport News, VA and mainly caters to the Hampton Roads region, the area where Michael Vick grew up and established the Bad Newz Kennels dogfighting operation. The articles used in this study from all three periodicals were selected without bias or intent to support any preconceived ideas held by the researcher. The key words used by the author in searching for the articles in the study were "Vick" and "dogfighting."

## Coding

In conducting this content analysis, various themes regarding the Vick case were coded as they emerged in the text. The researcher searched for relevant and reoccurring themes and key words, which were then assigned distinct codes. Codes in the form of a word or phrase were developed to capture any relevant information from the news stories or opinion pieces. In some cases, codes reflected basic journalistic practices, such as reporting details of the case; in other cases, codes captured different authors' efforts to promote an agenda or press for a specific action; yet another way that codes emerged was when the researcher observed how particular pieces of information were repeated over time in different articles. The codes that the researcher developed allowed noteworthy information from the stories to be categorized, and a tally was kept of how often information under various codes appeared. Each time a code appeared in an article, it would be noted; codes were tallied a maximum of one time per article regardless of how many times they occurred within the article so that quantitative results of the analysis would not be misleading. It was the goal of the researcher to record the number of articles in which specific codes appeared and from there to make inferences. The findings considered to be most relevant are discussed in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER 5

### ANALYSIS OF REPORTING ON THE MICHAEL VICK CASE

In analyzing the content of the selected articles, there were many noteworthy themes that warranted explanation and elaboration. First, articles analyzed from the initial stages of the Vick case consistently documented incriminating evidence discovered by police officers during a raid of Vick's Smithfield, VA property.

#### Incriminating Evidence

The sensational evidence found by local authorities, such as a large number of pit bulls with copious scars, blood stained carpets, rape stands, break sticks, and charts detailing training regimens, was extremely damaging news about the NFL star. However, to report such information is standard protocol for news articles. Many of the stories that detailed what was uncovered in the raid of Vick's property also mentioned his claim that he "rarely" visited the address and that he was not aware that his friends who he let live at the place were possibly running a dogfighting operation ("Vick-owned Property Already Under Contract" 2007). Several articles investigated the possible veracity of Vick's claim to be uninvolved. While no direct insinuations of Vick's guilt were documented, the publications readily stated the case against him. For example, to counter Vick's claim to the Atlanta Journal-Constitution that he was "never at the house," USA Today printed a quote from Ernest Hardy, Vick's closest neighbor to the property, who stated, "I've talked to (Vick) on his back porch....He's saying he's never there. I'm not saying he's lying, but saying he's never there makes him look suspicious" (Colston 2007). A May 17, 2007, Daily Press article stated that "an informant has said there is a witness who can put Vick at a dogfight," and that "strong evidence," such as a fighting pit,

scarred Pit Bulls, a bloodstained carpet, drugs to reduce swelling, dog training equipment, and a dog training regimen, had been found by investigators (Chufu 2007). In the 49 analyzed news articles from ESPN, the incriminating evidence discovered by authorities was discussed in 16 different articles, and in five different articles, ESPN authors stated Vick's claim that he rarely visited the property and thus was unaware of any dogfighting activity. The initial mention of Vick's "rarely there" claim gave the impression that he was given the benefit of the doubt despite his confirmed ownership of the property. But by continuing to mention Vick's "rarely there" claim, ESPN authors left open the character-damaging suggestion that he was both a liar and a dogfighter. Thus, Vick's credibility and image took further hits as a result of his highly publicized "rarely there" claim when he pled guilty to the dogfighting charges after initially claiming no involvement.

#### Gore

A theme that was frequently discussed in the articles from the sample was the amount of violence or gore commonly associated with dogfighting. This theme began to emerge as a common talking point as details of the case were brought to light throughout the weeks leading up to the July 17, 2007, indictment. The assertion of dogfighting violence became increasingly consistent and frequent in all three publications. From there, it remained a common theme in the subsequent articles of the study. Overall, the violence or gore associated with dogfighting (coded as "dogfighting/gore") was brought up in six of the eight analyzed USA Today editorials, in seven of the 20 analyzed USA Today news reports, two of the five ESPN editorials, 23 of the 49 ESPN news reports that were coded, and in eight of the 28 news articles from the Daily Press included in the study.

The violence or gore associated with dogfighting was mentioned a few different ways, most commonly through the claim that Vick and his accomplices in the Bad Newz Kennels operation killed dogs that did not perform up to standards in the fighting pit by means of electrocution, hanging, and drowning. For example, USA Today editorial columnist Jon Saraceno (2007) stated, “It is alleged Bad Newz Kennels operated a multistate gambling scheme for five years, where mistreatment of dogs and death by strangulation, drowning or electrocution was customary.” An ESPN article said, “According to the indictment, dogs that lost fights or fared poorly in test fights were sometimes executed by hanging, electrocution, or other means” (“Grim Details Emerge as Vick’s Co-defendants Plead Guilty” 2007). In addition, a reporter from the Daily Press wrote, “Dogs were said to have been shot, hanged, drowned, electrocuted and at least one was killed by slamming the dog’s body to the ground” (Wittmeyer 2007). A second example from ESPN put an even stronger emphasis on the violence by using an active rather than a passive voice: “And then there is a subculture of people who like to train dogs, then like to watch them fight while betting on them, then kill them by hanging or electrocution or drowning afterward” (Keown 2007). These articles and others pointed out that such practices are common in the world of dogfighting, stating that dogs that do not demonstrate sufficient aggression, gameness, and fighting skills are regularly put to death as opposed to being sold or given away. While it is true that fighting dogs who do not fulfill certain expectations are often put to death by their owners (Evans et al. 1998), journalists consistently reminded their audiences of the manner in which the defendants in this case, to use a word that appeared frequently in this theme, “executed” the underperforming dogs. By highlighting killing as a commonplace act committed by members of a “subculture,” articles containing this theme could use shocking data to both attract and repel readers.

In addition to the incessant documentations of the gruesome ways Bad News Kennels personnel destroyed underperforming fighting dogs, the claim that dogfights often continue until one dog either dies in the pit or sustains mortal injuries was also mentioned fairly often. The following is one example of such statements: “The dogs battle, tearing into each other’s flesh until one is dead or can’t move” (“Window to a Cruel World” 2007). Frequent references to the bloodsport’s violence or gore played a powerful role in persuading a mainstream public that already opposed dogfighting to detest the practice and everything commonly associated with it. While one could argue that these publications were simply reporting the facts, repeating these details with such frequency and consistency from one article to another emphasizes the status quo belief that good people do not kill dogs or make them fight.

#### The Good Guys?

Another aspect of the media’s coverage of the case in the sample was the amount of press given to representatives of animal rights groups such as the Humane Society of the United States, the ASPCA, and People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA). Of the three organizations, the Humane Society was given by far the most publicity in the Vick case. All three main publications in this study gave ample coverage to the views of people affiliated with the Humane Society. The organization used this case to reach the public and encourage people to share their beliefs on the treatment of animals. Humane Society President and CEO Wayne Pacelle emerged as a rather prominent figure in the media coverage of the Vick case. Also propelled into the spotlight as a result of the publicity from the Vick case was John Goodwin, the Humane Society’s deputy manager of animal-fighting issues. In the articles analyzed from the main publications involved in the study, ESPN and the Daily Press both devoted significant coverage to individuals and organizations with humane credentials. Spokespeople representing

humane organizations were cited in 12 out of the 49 ESPN reported news articles (although never in the editorials) and in six of the 28 Daily Press articles. Interestingly, there were only three occurrences of this theme in the 28 USA Today articles.

### Law and Order

The accusations surrounding Vick's involvement in the Bad Newz Kennels dogfighting operations inspired "law and order" discussions at various points in the case's development. The multitude of charges Vick potentially faced were explored in detail in all three of the main publications analyzed in this study up to the days immediately following August 20, 2007, when Vick reached a deal with federal prosecutors and agreed to plead guilty to "Conspiracy to Travel in Interstate Commerce in Aid of Unlawful Activities and to Sponsor a Dog in an Animal Fighting Venture" ("Vick Suspended Indefinitely by NFL" 2007).

Several articles discussed the potential punishment that Michael Vick might receive. Obviously, his potential criminal punishment was contingent on the charges he would wind up facing. Vick's potential punishment was mentioned more often as evidence against him began to mount and it became a key issue after his July 17, 2007, federal indictment. In fact, part of the pressure on Vick to hurry up and reach a plea deal by federal prosecutors was due to the threat of a possible superseding indictment from federal prosecutors on multiple counts carrying greater punishment. Vick's potential punishment was discussed most frequently in the articles from USA Today, where it was documented in 13 of the 28 articles. In the 54 ESPN articles, it was documented in 21, and the theme arose in six of the 28 Daily Press articles.

Due to Michael Vick's status as a professional football player, the "law and order" theme extended to the NFL in terms of the NFL's personal conduct policy and the potential disciplinary action that Vick would receive from the league. This aspect of the story was discussed much

more frequently in the ESPN articles and in the editorial and news articles of USA Today than in the Daily Press. The “NFL conduct policy/discipline” code was found 18 of the 49 ESPN reported news articles and in one of the publication’s five analyzed editorials. For the 20 USA Today news articles included in the study, the code appeared in nine; in the USA Today editorials, as the code appeared in five of the eight articles. The Daily Press, however, mentioned the topic only three of the 28 sampled news articles.

It is important to note that the NFL’s personal conduct policy had been instituted earlier that year to impose tougher standards for off-field conduct by players and other league employees. Those found to be in violation of the policy (solely at the commissioner’s discretion) were subject to punishments such as indefinite suspension, and players could face disciplinary action just for being charged with a crime regardless of whether or not they were convicted. ESPN strongly endorsed the policy on its popular sports news show “Sportscenter” when it was established; and the articles in the sample from USA Today and ESPN devoted attention to it in what was perhaps an attempt to validate the policy’s existence.

Why did these national news media outlets emphasize the NFL’s conduct policy more than the regional newspaper? The personal conduct policy represents the NFL’s attempt to protect its brand by raising the penalty for drawing negative attention to the league. Moreover, corporate NFL sponsors had grown weary of negative stories of players involved in substance abuse and violence that threatened to tarnish their own corporate images (Bell 2007). Thus, the personal conduct policy helped the league and its sponsors to distance themselves from transgressing players and regain integrity by punishing them. Because USA Today and ESPN are national corporations that work closely with the NFL and share business ties through advertising deals and television contracts, it is logical to believe that both of these national media

outlets had a greater interest in using the Vick case to reaffirm to their audience that the newly instituted policy should be embraced.

None of the articles in the sample raised questions about due process with regard to the personal conduct policy's punishments. In addition, none of the articles second-guessed the NFL's right to launch its own investigation into Vick's alleged involvement in dogfighting, which the NFL apparently felt entitled to do despite the fact that investigating crimes is an official role for law enforcement officers as opposed to professional sports organizations.<sup>4</sup> In fact, the only way that the NFL was challenged by the press in any of the analyzed articles was through claims in editorials that the league was slow to enforce the personal conduct policy in Vick's case -- as if the NFL was pampering a star player. Such ideas first appeared in late May of 2007 but appeared much more after July 17, 2007, when Vick was formally indicted on dogfighting charges. For instance, in a July 20, 2007, USA Today article entitled, "NFL Policy Questioned In Vick Case" Tom Weir insinuated that Vick was receiving preferential treatment over lesser known players, ignoring the presumption of innocence on which U.S. law is based. However, these objections came to an end on Monday, July 24, 2007, when Vick was told by the league's commissioner not to report to training camp. Talk of the personal conduct policy and the league's discipline of Vick continued after the indictment. On August 20, 2007, Michael Vick agreed to plead guilty to dogfighting charges and was subsequently dealt an official indefinite suspension by NFL commissioner Roger Goodell on August 24, the same day that the plea deal was formally filed in federal court ("Vick Suspended Indefinitely by NFL" 2007).

In the wake of the July 17, 2007, federal indictment, the "law and order" theme appeared in additional stories about corporate damage control masquerading as punishment. Several

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<sup>4</sup> When the NFL carried out an investigation of brain trauma in NFL players, several prominent physicians objected to the research, questioning the NFL's motives as protectionist (Blount 2009).

stories covered Vick's loss of corporate sponsors such as Nike, Gatorade, Air Tran Airways, and Rawlings. USA Today reporter Michael McCarthy announced in a July 20, 2007, article that Nike had decided to "suspend the [August 1] release" of the Air Zoom Vick V shoe. In attempts to distance itself from the allegations against Vick, the corporation issued the following statement: "Nike is concerned by the serious and highly disturbing allegations made against Michael Vick, and we consider any cruelty to animals inhumane and abhorrent" (McCarthy 2007). Although Nike had announced that it would stand by Vick and allow him due process just a day earlier, the Humane Society and other groups pressured them to end their marketing relationship with him, as reported by ESPN on July 19, 2007, ("Nike Will Not Release Fifth Signature Vick Shoe"). Ever image conscious despite their sometimes questionable business ethics, corporations such as Nike seek to protect their brand and their marketing campaigns. After a week, the pressure on Nike to distance itself from the athlete eventually grew too great; the Daily Press reported that Nike suspended its contract with Vick on July 27, 2007, stating that if "the NFL star is acquitted of charges related to dogfights, he may resume a contract with Nike" ("Nike Shelves Vick Deal; Reebok Cuts Shirt" 2007). A few days later, sporting equipment manufacturer Rawlings chose to sever all corporate ties to Vick. A July 31, 2007, ESPN article reported their claim that it was "necessary" to end their "relationship with Mr. Vick at this time" ("Rawlings Drops Vick as Sponsor" 2007).

In the same Daily Press article announcing Nike's decision to suspend its marketing contract with Vick, the paper reported that Reebok, the NFL's official uniform supplier at the time, had taken "the unprecedented step of stopping sales of his No. 7 jersey" ("Rawlings Drops Vick as Sponsor" 2007). Although Reebok did not specifically sponsor Vick but simply owned the right to sell his jersey as they do all NFL players under their agreement with the league, the

corporation apparently believed that any product associated with Vick was a liability. Analyzed publications reported that other companies took similar actions during this time. For example, trading card and sports memorabilia companies Donruss and Upper Deck discontinued sales of Vick's sports memorabilia and removed his trading card from their 2007 NFL sets which were to go on sale that fall ("Rawlings Drops Vick as Sponsor" 2007; Keown 2007). Taken together, such actions seemed like an attempt by the corporate establishment to preemptively expunge Michael Vick as a form of corporate justice, even though he had not yet been found (or pled) guilty. Moreover, the legitimacy of the moral authority which these companies were using their economic power to exert was never called into question in articles analyzed for the study's three main publications, nor was the inherent conflict between moral actions and profit motives. Interestingly, however, in a July 31, 2007, ESPN editorial, "Have Nike and the NFL Gone Too Far, Too Fast with Vick?" Tim Keown addressed the lack of due process afforded to the athlete by the league and his corporate sponsors. The article also referred to the "rush to evaporate Vick" as "a little creepy" while posing the question, "Does he cease to exist if his jersey isn't in the store and his shoes never leave the warehouse?" Although it should be noted that Keown (2007) made sure not to bite the hand that feeds him, so to speak, by challenging the existence of the corporate establishment's power, which he referred to as "[f]ine," dismissing it as "no problem," he did at least call into question how they handled the Vick case.

#### Enforcing the Dominant Opinion

An interesting and perhaps disturbing story regarding the Vick case occurred around May 21, 2007, about a month after the dogfighting allegations initially surfaced. Two NFL players in a joint interview made public statements supporting Vick, only to be vilified by league officials and the press for expressing their support. In a local news interview with Norfolk, VA NBC

affiliate WAVY-TV 10, Washington Redskins teammates Clinton Portis and Chris Samuels were asked about Vick's possible involvement in dogfighting. Portis expressed his views on the topic and stated, "I don't know if he was fighting dogs or not, but it's his property, it's his dog. If that's what he wants to do, do it. [...] It's killers on the loose and everything else out here and you want to hunt down Michael Vick over fighting some dogs? I think people should mind their business" ("Clinton Portis defends Vick and Dog fights" YouTube). Samuels then laughed at Portis's remarks and added, "You can't accuse this man of something and throw the book at him right now. He's got to be convicted first, and I don't think that's fair" ("Redskins RB Portis: Vick Can Do What He Wants" 2007; "Clinton Portis defends Vick and Dog fights").

Portis, a young black man from rural Mississippi, where dogfighting has long been practiced, then said when asked if the bloodsport was prevalent among professional athletes, "I think it's prevalent in life. I'm from Laurel, Mississippi, so I know a lot of back roads that have the dogfighting if you want to go see it, you know, but they not bothering them people because those people not big name. I'm sure some police got some dogs that fight them, some judges got dogs and everything else" ("Clinton Portis defends Vick and Dog fights"). As discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, Portis's speculation that police and judges participate in dogfighting is backed up in the literature from the ASPCA and other authorities on the topic.

In response to the interview granted by Portis and Samuels, NFL officials objected and some articles in national sources took on a reproving tone. For example, USA Today columnist Christine Brennan (2007) wrote, "Not surprisingly, Redskins and NFL officials didn't find this quite as humorous as the players did, and serious apologies were issued all around." The NFL pressured the two players to apologize. By objecting to the players' opinions so quickly and emphatically, members of the national media, like Brennan, participated in corporate damage

control on the behalf of the NFL. A series of public clarifications and retractions appeared in the press. The day after the interview, the Redskins released the following statement on Portis's behalf: "In the recent interview I gave concerning dog fighting, I want to make it clear that I do not take part in dog fighting or condone dog fighting in any manner" ("Redskins Apologize for Portis' Vick Comments" 2007). The same day Samuel addressed reporters and said, "It's very serious. We don't agree with dogfighting" (Maske 2007).

The two players, however, were not the only ones to apologize; the NFL and Washington Redskins took pains to shame Clinton Portis in their apologies. NFL commissioner Roger Goodell said in a written statement, "I am extremely disappointed and embarrassed for Clinton Portis. This does not reflect the sentiment of the Redskins, the NFL or the NFL players" (Maske 2007). The Redskins looked to further distance themselves from the players' views by issuing an apology of their own. "The Washington Redskins, as an organization, obviously would never condone anything related to animal cruelty. The team takes the comments of Clinton Portis very seriously and apologizes to everyone that was offended," claimed a representative from the team (Maske 2007).

Four different articles relating to Clinton Portis's comments on the Vick case were analyzed for this study. Two were ESPN reported news articles written by unnamed authors, one was the USA Today editorial written by Christine Brennan, and the other was a Washington Post article written by Mark Maske that appeared on the MSNBC.com website. All four articles vilified Portis and Samuels, rejected their perspective, and invalidated their support for Vick. Each author eagerly endorsed the apologies from various parties without questioning the coercion prompting Portis's and Samuels's conspicuous about-face on dogfighting. All articles also supported the commissioner's attack on Portis for his opinion. Brennan defended the

Redskins' negative reaction to the interview. One of the ESPN editorials covertly attacked Portis for his views on dogfighting and the Vick case and gave an unflattering description of Portis and Samuels by stating that they "giggled" throughout the interview while defending Vick and "ridicul[ed] authorities for pursuing possible dog fighting charges" ("Redskins Apologize for Portis' Vick Comments" 2007). The title of ESPN's May 21, 2007, article was simply, "Redskins RB Portis: Vick Can Do What He Wants," insinuating that Portis believed Vick had some sort of special entitlement to break the law when all he said was that he did not view dogfighting as a problem compared to violent crimes against humans. Additionally, in his report in the Washington Post, Mark Maske proposed the idea of subjecting the players to NFL discipline, possibly in the form of fines or even suspensions, simply for making statements that normalized dogfighting in the interview.

### Gambling

When discussing the punishments Vick was facing legally and from the NFL for his role in the Bad Newz Kennels dogfighting operation, the gambling aspect of the case was sometimes introduced. Although Vick's participation in the bloodsport was not openly motivated by financial gain, gambling is intrinsic to dogfighting because all organized dogfights involve a purse awarded to the winning dog's side. While such a form of gambling is illegal under U.S. law and added to Vick's legal woes, gambling is forbidden under NFL rules, raising the possibility that Vick could receive a lifetime ban from the league for betting on dogfights. Interestingly, ESPN devoted by far the most news coverage to the gambling aspect of the case, as they discussed the matter in 11 of the 49 reported news articles analyzed in the study. Gambling was also mentioned in four of the eight USA Today editorials, but it garnered little coverage in the Daily Press. In none of the study's articles, however, did authors address how NFL

franchises, like the Washington Redskins, engage in institutionalized gambling in that their financial gains and losses depend largely on whether or not they win or lose. Also interesting is that ESPN devoted the most coverage to the gambling angle considering that many who visit the website do so to participate in fantasy football, where money changes hands among participants based on results.

### Constructing Moral Unworthiness

As Vick's conviction on dogfighting charges became increasingly certain during the summer months, USA Today, especially in its editorials, began to discuss the player's NFL future. Questions were raised about the physical condition Vick would be in when he completed his legal sentence, whether or not he would play the quarterback position upon returning to the game or use his athletic versatility and try to play at a different position, whether or not he would be a starter or a bench player, when and if he would be allowed by the league's commissioner to play in the NFL again, and what other options might be available to him if he were unable to return to the NFL. The latter option envisioned for Vick was popular with a small number of influential sports writers. In an editorial released on August 21, 2007, the day in which Vick agreed to plead guilty to federal dogfighting charges, USA Today's Jon Saraceno states that "Vick's future as a player lies on Goodell's desk," and that "the commissioner will face pressure to see Vick never plays" again. Saraceno goes further to say that, whether or not he is ever allowed the opportunity to resume his NFL career, "Vick is finished as a frontline, impact NFL quarterback. Period." In addition to this, Saraceno campaigned to have Vick banned from the league for life in an August 29, 2007, editorial titled "Goodell Should Give Vick Same Chance Vick Gave Pit Bulls He Butchered," stating, "I hope [NFL commissioner Roger Goodell] shows Vick, who obliterated lines of decency and civilized behavior, the door to pedestrian life. I don't

suggest that, upon his release from an anticipated prison term, he be denied the right to pursue a living. He should not be deprived of becoming a productive citizen. It just should not be in the NFL.”

All of the analyzed USA Today editorials were written by either Saraceno or Christine Brennan, who has also worked with ESPN in the past. While neither writer expressed sympathy or support for Vick, Saraceno seemed to criticize the quarterback more harshly than Brennan. Brennan, in a May 24, 2007, article, referred to Vick as “sadistic” and attacked his masculinity for his alleged participation in dogfighting. Saraceno, however, authored more of the analyzed editorials and was consistent in his all-out assault on Michael Vick, whom he refers to in one instance as the Bad Newz Kennels “CEO of torture” (Saraceno 2007). On several occasions, Saraceno attacked Vick’s character and put it on trial for the audience to judge. In his August 29, 2007 editorial, Saraceno states that although Vick claims he “just made a mistake,” “when someone is guilty of the same illegal, sadistic behavior for six years, it is no mistake. It is something insidious, even sinister.” In his August 21, 2007, editorial, Saraceno asks, “Would you trust this man to be your leader? To live in your community?” He also attacked the quarterback’s intelligence, judgment, on-field playing ability, and, on one occasion offered advice on how Vick should handle the situation, stating, “At 27, it is time he stop listening to ‘friends’ and relatives and start looking in the mirror for help – he should become his own best friend” (Saraceno 2007).

In other instances Saraceno condemned the bloodsport of dogfighting and those who participate in it while trying to elicit visceral emotions from his audience by using such phrases as “man’s best friend” and “God’s creatures” to describe dogs. Interestingly, Saraceno and Brennan both used dog analogies at certain times when discussing the case, making statements

such as, “[T]he Atlanta quarterback, who escaped from public housing to enjoy the penthouse lifestyle, deserves to sit in the NFL doghouse” (Saraceno 2007).

Saraceno devoted his articles to attacking Vick and portraying him as a hopelessly inadequate, morally unworthy person. His editorials attempt to convince the public that Vick is not simply a young man who made a terrible mistake but that his involvement in the Bad Newz Kennels dogfighting operation is a reflection of his true character, which is so wretched and flawed that it is beyond reform and thus cannot be rehabilitated. In a July 25, 2007, editorial, Saraceno refers to Vick as “ignorant, if not of the law then of the universe” due to his “uneducated, cruel view of how God’s creatures should be treated.” In his August 29, 2007, editorial, Saraceno argues that Vick is morally unworthy of forgiveness from the public or a second chance in the NFL, stating, “A serial animal abuser simply does not belong.” He then asks the question, “As a young boy in Virginia, I wonder if he ever learned empathy” (Saraceno 2007).

#### A Broader Perspective

In their criticism and demonization of Michael Vick, neither Saraceno nor Brennan ever looked at the case through a broader perspective of unequal power relations among groups of class, race, or culture. An example of an editorial style article that did take a broader perspective when analyzing the Vick case was found in an online journal published by Duke University’s Office of News and Communications. This August 29, 2007, article written by Duke Women’s Studies Associate Professor Kathy Rudy is titled “Michael Vick, Dog Fighting and Race.” Rudy begins the article by stating her humane credentials as a “strong advocate for animal welfare” who “despise[s] dog fighting” and has “worked in dog rescue for many years” (Rudy 2007). However, she describes the hatred directed toward Vick as “alarming” considering the other

forms of animal abuse and cruelty that mainstream American society seems to accept (Rudy 2007). Rudy specifically addresses the cruelty that occurs in rodeos, horse racing, dog racing, and factory farming while bringing to light the fact that “millions of dogs and cats” are put to death in ASPCA animal shelters throughout the country (Rudy 2007). In offering a possible explanation for this inconsistency, Rudy (2007) states, “Vick is black, and most of the folks in charge of the other activities are white.”

### Hip-Hop Culture Put On Trial

Rudy (2007) also went on to claim that “a reading of many of the Vick news stories indicts him and his friends as much for being involved in hip-hop subculture as for fighting dogs.” While this study found overt examples of this in an Associated Press article that was posted on MSNBC.com, an MTV.com article, and an extremely biased article appearing on NPR’s website, there were no direct attacks on Vick for his association with Hip-Hop, or on Hip-Hop culture itself, in the articles selected from USA Today, ESPN, and the Daily Press. In addition, although many news articles from this time were critical of Hip-Hop music due to the fact that dogfighting was glamorized in a few albums, songs, and videos, there was only one mention of this affiliation found in the articles from the three main publications, which was in a July 17, 2007, Daily Press story, where a quote from John Goodwin of the Humane Society stated that dogfighting had been “glamorized by hip hop stars such as Jay-Z and DMX” (Latson 2007). So, while USA Today, ESPN, and the Daily Press may have vilified Vick as a result of his association with Hip-Hop on top of his involvement in an illegal activity commonly linked to the oppositional culture, there were no instances of them directly attacking Hip hop culture itself or Vick’s cultural ties.

Still, examples of Hip-Hop essentially being put on trial in the court of public opinion from sampled articles outside the study's three major analyzed publications bring to light some points that are key to this analysis. The July 24, 2007, Associated Press article posted on msnbc.com makes claims that tie dogfighting to Hip-Hop culture. In this article, a veterinarian is quoted as saying, "It [dogfighting] is all tied into the hip hop culture, the image and projection of a dog as an extension of manhood. The pit bull is the ultimate accessory" ("Vick Case Illustrates Pit Bull's Status" 2007). Interestingly, the article then points out the veterinarian's race, stating, "It's not just white people like Denise saying that," and goes on to give testimonies of two different black men who do not support dogfighting and indict Hip-Hop for its prominence ("Vick Case Illustrates Pit Bull's Status" 2007). Kansas City Star sports columnist Jason Whitlock, who has stirred up his share of racial controversies in the past, claims that "Hip-hop culture put Vick in this bind" and that his troubles should "serve as yet another wakeup call for black athletes to reject hip-hop/prison culture" ("Vick Case Illustrates Pit Bull's Status" 2007). The second black source in the article, Washington University English and African American studies Professor Gerald Early, is quoted as stating that many black pro football players are influenced by rap music and "fired up by some sort of image of being a gangster" ("Vick Case Illustrates Pit Bull's Status" 2007). Presenting the two aforementioned black men as racial spokespeople (rather than consulting scholars of Hip-Hop or dogfighting) helped legitimize the claims that dogfighting was accepted in Hip-Hop culture.

### Cultural Relativism

The degree to which dogfighting and Hip-Hop are intertwined is debatable. The very same article tying dogfighting to Hip-Hop quotes a member of the United Kennel Club (the breeders association that once promoted dogfighting but has long since denounced the practice),

who states, “It is important to understand that [dogfighting] isn’t about race, but it is about culture. One is rural, and the other is urban. Both are equally horrible” (“Vick Case Illustrates Pit Bull’s Status” 2007). These attempts to explain or assign blame through a cultural lens expose an interesting debate about cultural relativism in the media regarding the Vick case. While certain people were willing to accept, or at least forgive, Vick’s actions as a result of his cultural influences, others claimed that his involvement in the bloodsport was nonetheless intolerable. Expressed views from celebrities and sports figures on both sides of this argument, such as professional basketball player Stephon Marbury, Whoopi Goldberg, West Virginia Senator Robert Byrd, and NASCAR driver Greg Biffle, were given coverage in the study’s analyzed articles. Individuals given press for defending Vick were often subject to media scrutiny while those attacking him seemed to get more of a free pass. For instance, Byrd’s emotional attack of Vick on the U.S. Senate floor was documented in a July 9, 2007, ESPN article. However, the article made no mention of Senator Byrd’s former involvement in the Ku Klux Klan (Pianin 2005) and thus neglected to mention the possibility that the Senator’s reaction may not have been as intense had Vick’s skin color been white. In contrast, Marbury’s comparison of dogfighting to hunting was labeled as that week’s “Just Shut Up” moment by ESPN Outdoors columnist Gregg Patterson. Even more noteworthy, however, was an August 21, 2007, ESPN editorial written by Tim Keown titled “Stop with the ‘Subculture’ excuse for Michael Vick.” In it, Keown states, “The way I hear it, subculture is used as a justification, as if attaching the word culture – in whatever form – somehow imbues the activity with credibility. In other words: However depraved it may be, you have to somehow respect it because it’s cultural.” Keown (2007) then goes on to say that those making such a cultural relativist argument are “demeaning themselves in the process.”

Rudy (2007), however, seems to get to the heart of the matter when discussing the illegality of the bloodsport in America, claiming, “[T]he fact that dogfighting is illegal while other [forms of animal abuse] remain acceptable is because dogfighting is no longer a sport of the middle and upper class.” Moreover, while some could argue that dogfighting has in fact been illegal in some parts of the U.S. for several generations, law enforcement officials and lawmakers have teamed together to target the practice and punish it more harshly just when dogfighting became linked to blacks who identify with Hip-Hop culture and to men with lower socioeconomic status in general. The emergence of the young, urban, African American “street fighter” category of dogfighter over the past 15-20 years (Burke 2007) has triggered an altered perception of those involved in dogfighting. The federal Animal Fighting Prohibition Enforcement Act and numerous new state laws have increased both the penalties for participating in the bloodsport and the resources for law enforcement agencies to eradicate it (Gibson 2008). To draw a direct line of causality between these two factors demands further investigation, but it is interesting to note that the light shed on the practice by the Vick case was followed immediately by an increase in dogfighting arrests along with the reclassification of it as a felony in the two states where it was previously a misdemeanor (Koch 2007). Finding records of lawmakers’ communications and analyzing the rhetoric employed in their public speeches prior to reclassification might offer intriguing data.

#### Race-Related Comparisons

Michael Vick, like so many famous black figures before him who drew the ire of the establishment such as Jack Johnson, Muhammad Ali, Malcolm X, Dolomite, Mike Tyson, and O.J. Simpson, came to be cast by the American media into the role of “bad nigger.” This image has been placed on many black men throughout American history, both real and make believe, as

a means to justify unequal treatment and to stir up racial fears (Roberts 1983). As a result of his involvement in dogfighting, Vick came to be seen by mainstream America as a threatening, violent black man who had no regard for the law. While the articles analyzed from USA today, ESPN, and the Daily Press did not engage overtly in portraying Vick as a dangerous black man, a curious pattern emerged in that Vick's actions were compared to the legal troubles of other high-profile male athletes, none of whom were white. Overall, Vick was compared to other vilified African American male sports figures in nine separate instances in the ESPN reported news articles and in one instance in the ESPN editorials. In the USA Today articles, he was compared to other vilified African American male sports figures on two occasions in both the editorials and news articles.

In these different articles, Vick was compared to Mike Tyson, Barry Bonds, O.J. Simpson, and, on several occasions, Adam "Pacman" Jones, a football player who had just previously received a one-year suspension from the NFL for numerous legal charges. Saraceno states in a November 23, 2007, USA Today editorial that even Barry Bonds knew how to choose his friends better than Vick (in reference to Bonds's ties to an anabolic steroid dealer), and Brennan actually made the same comparison in an August 16, 2007, article in stating that Vick's accomplices told authorities of his involvement in the operation while Bonds's friend is sitting in jail for his refusal to implicate him for steroid use. Saraceno (2007) added that Mike Tyson was also unable to distance himself from his friends, "and look what happened to him." Saraceno (2007) goes on to say in the article that "[t]he 'hood had the irresistible lure of loyal friendships and shared experiences. Neither the fighter nor the football player had secure roots." The fact that Vick was compared to other vilified sports figures who "happened" to be black without any direct mention of their race could serve as an example of what Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2002)

describes as post-Jim Crow color blind racism, where direct racial (and racist) language is avoided.

Many themes grew out of this content analysis that focused mainly on three media outlets' coverage of the Michael Vick dogfighting case. The final chapter of this thesis explores their overall meaning and suggests some inferences that can be drawn from the Michael Vick case.

## CHAPTER 6

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

#### Discussion

The purpose of the content analysis was to analyze the media coverage of the Michael Vick dogfighting case. While the news coverage of the case was extensive from the time the story of the dogfighting allegations broke in late April of 2007 until the end of the summer of that year when Vick entered into a plea agreement, the researcher elected to narrow the focus of analysis by selecting three news publications for in-depth investigation. Although the three publications selected (two national and one regional) are by no means claimed to be a representation of all mainstream American media outlets, interesting findings did emerge.

Perhaps the most relevant revelation was the difference in the amount of attention given to the NFL's personal conduct policy by the two national publications (ESPN and USA Today) compared to the regional publication. The personal conduct policy received far more coverage in the national publications; it was quite possibly the most frequently discussed theme in them when considering all factors. The importance of this distinction is that ESPN and USA Today were quite possibly using the Vick case to promote a national corporate agenda of making the NFL appear more sponsor-friendly by punishing and distancing itself from transgressors. As previously stated, the league drew pressure for some time from corporate sponsors to develop a conduct policy where players in violation could face sanctions from the league for, to use a phrase commonly used at the time, "tarnishing the shield" (i.e. the NFL corporate logo), and thus potentially damaging the carefully constructed image of the NFL brand. The vested interests of national media outlets such as ESPN and USA Today in this policy reflect how their national appeal and profitability depend in part on the popularity of the league; many of their advertising

sponsors also have business relationships with the NFL. It is therefore clearly in their best interest from a business standpoint to ensure that the NFL presents and sells a product that does not destabilize or disturb profitable corporate affiliates.

Overall, the status quo of corporate operating procedures was not called into question by any of the three main publications in this study. With regard to justice, not only did the legitimacy of the NFL's newly adopted personal conduct policy go unquestioned, but so did the codes and actions of the legal system. Also accepted without debate was the system of corporate justice where corporate affiliates, oftentimes without due process, look to distance themselves from transgressing individuals by cutting all business ties with them. Companies cultivate the impression of moral superiority through such practices as well, although the existence of these motives in all of the sponsors and affiliates who ceased business relations with Vick was never openly questioned in the articles analyzed in the study. Even the one ESPN editorial where Keown asks whether the sponsored companies acted precipitously did not criticize the pattern of corporate distancing. Individual actors who defended Vick, questioned the NFL's personal conduct policy, or challenged the severity of punishment the quarterback might receive were subjected to unwavering criticism. Furthermore, it is perhaps true (although virtually impossible to prove) that editorial writers, especially Saraceno and Brennan of the USA Today, used the dogfighting case not only to construct Vick's character as morally unworthy but to establish themselves, and possibly their publications, as morally upstanding.

Despite any criticisms brought to light by this study, it should be pointed out that the three publications analyzed in-depth upheld a level of journalistic integrity perhaps not shown in samples from some other media outlets. Although sensational language was used in all three publications to describe the allegations against the defendants, perhaps with the intention of

generating even more hate and moral outrage toward them, the reported news articles sampled in all three main publications seemed to lack overt, intentional bias. While the main three publications repeatedly mentioned the gory means that the underperforming dogs were put to death by Vick and his accomplices and chose words such as “executed” and “murdered” to describe such acts (words which would not be chosen in an article about an institutionalized form of animal killing such as factory farming), they consistently stopped short of the esoterically spun wording used in the NPR article, where dogfighting was described as a “bloody industry” and a “savage underground culture.” In addition, this particular NPR article, as well as the MSNBC and MTV.com articles (included in the sample for their usefulness as “deviant cases”) leveled some form of attack against Hip-Hop culture, something that none of the study’s three main publications did.

Nonetheless, only ideas and opinions accepted within the dominant mainstream were given voice without subsequent criticism throughout the sampled news and editorial articles of the three main publications. Ideas such as those expressed in the Rudy article that called into question practices of animal cruelty and prevailing beliefs of the corporate establishment and mainstream American society were wholly absent in the articles from USA Today, ESPN, the Daily Press, or any of the other mainstream media outlets included in the analysis. Perhaps if these news publications put forward a more nuanced view, they might be accused of condoning dogfighting and thus risk losing precious advertising revenue, which has become increasingly harder to obtain. For example, any attempts to explain the context of Vick’s involvement in the bloodsport by discussing the player’s personal background or cultural ties could potentially be construed as being sympathetic to dogfighting or as making excuses for Vick. Considering that many sports articles today are relatively short in length, providing nuanced background or

context may have been difficult to achieve, but it could have aided a larger goal of journalistic objectivity.

### Conclusion

When analyzed from a sociological perspective, the Michael Vick dogfighting case can be characterized as a complex web of elements. While the mainstream media and many members of America's general public may oversimplify the case in terms of right and wrong or good and evil, the circumstances surrounding the case are more complicated. Factors such as social class, culture, and race, along with the high regard to which dogs are held in American society as pets, must be considered because they play a significant role in how people and their actions are perceived by others.

The Bad Newz Kennels dogfighting operation reflects the involvement of all three types of dogfighters discussed in Chapter 3. While one could argue that Vick was more of an enthusiast than a professional because his role as an NFL quarterback limited fighting dogs to his spare time, his football-related earnings enabled him to invest every bit as much money in the bloodsport as its most prominent dogmen. Yet Vick and his accomplices' cultural backgrounds resemble street fighters because they grew up in African-American urban neighborhoods and identified with Hip-Hop culture.

Social class, culture, and race can all play a significant role in how a practice or a specific case is viewed in society and handled legally, and all three factors influence power relations. This can be easily shown through historical as well as contemporary comparisons. The fact that dogfighting has become more common in the US in recent years is directly linked to the emergence of the urban street fighter (Peters 2008). Such individuals now make up the majority of Americans who are involved in the bloodsport ("Dog a Booming Business, Experts Say"

2007). Meanwhile, dogfighting has become even more detested among mainstream Americans, and punishments for those who participate have substantially increased along with resources allocated to catch them through new federal aid and state laws (Tobias 2008).

Although dogfighting was initially brought to America by English and Irish immigrants and was even a popular pastime of the genteel Southerners into the 19th century, its popularity soon became mostly relegated to the more poverty-stricken areas of the rural south, and it has been proscribed by most Americans for quite some time. One factor in the amount of outrage towards the bloodsport in contemporary America is the fact that dogs are the most popular pets in the U.S. Reasons commonly given to explain why dogs are so beloved as pets in mainstream American culture is that dogs are loyal companions and protectors who love their human owners unconditionally (Brindley 2011). Dogs' unconditional love and loyalty renders them especially undeserving of any cruelty. Consequently, most Americans are much more concerned about the wellbeing of dogs than other animals (even cats) and are thus more sensitive to any harmful acts against them.

Yet the link between the strong rise in popularity of the practice among urban black Hip-Hop youth (Burke 2007) and its further condemnation in American society is no coincidence. To be fair, many argue that this new category of dogfighters merits heightened concern, claiming that they are dangerous people who are likely to be affiliated with violent gangs and involved in various other crimes. They are also characterized as young and irresponsible, as the average age of these street fighters is said to be between 13 and 17 (Peters 2008). Their dogs are claimed to be a threat to others, as they are often trained to indiscriminately attack humans and other animals alike (Gibson 2008). Another disturbing claim against this group of dogfighters is that

they steal other people's pets for participation in the bloodsport, both as fighters and as bait (Mott 2004).<sup>5</sup>

If true, these claims justify viewing street fighters as menaces to society, even to the point where more traditional dogmen condemn their methods. But equally relevant to this “dangerous and deviant” frame are street fighters’ multiple minority statuses. Hip-Hop is considered an oppositional culture in that many of its values run counter to the mainstream, which facilitates profiling black adherents as crime-prone by the American establishment (Saddik 2003).

Although lower class white southerners are certainly not of high social standing in the U.S., they are clearly of higher status as a group than urban black men who identify with Hip-Hop. As Burke (2007) states, “A pursuit once practiced chiefly in the rural South has moved to the mean streets of the ’hood,” claiming that this bloodsport once most commonly practiced in Mississippi and Louisiana is now most prominent in the ghettos of many east coast cities. It is noteworthy that harsher laws against dogfighting have been passed over the past decade as mainstream Americans became increasingly aware of this changing demographic.

Thorstein Veblen’s leisure class theory, briefly touched on in Chapter 2, offers a useful perspective for understanding the significance of the changing demographics of dogfighting. Veblen believed that elite, upper class individuals in a more advanced society, such as that of the United States, comprised what he labeled as a “leisure class” and argued it is they who typically have the greatest influence on the desired lifestyle of most members in a given society (Veblen 1994/1899). As Chapter 2 describes, dogfighting was once considered a “reputable activity” in the 19th century South and “originally emerged as a means of adherence to the standards of the leisure class” (Evans et al. 1998:828). Thus, the bloodsport was originally introduced to the

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<sup>5</sup> If untrue, the widespread claim that dogfighters steal other people’s pets for participation in the bloodsport is representative of what Cohen (1972) refers to as a “moral panic.”

common people and slaves of the South by the leisure class (Hylton 2009). It was only after these individuals of elite status moved away from dogfighting that it was socially condemned and made illegal (undoubtedly through the efforts of elite moral entrepreneurs). When the tipping point came where the only men engaged in dogfighting hailed from socioeconomically disadvantaged subcultures, the establishment then labeled dogfighting as a social problem and as a crime worthy of punishment.

Thus, the key factors in how the bloodsport of dogfighting is perceived in American society are the type of animals involved as well as the socioeconomic class positions of the groups participating in the activity or act and the degree to which that group is in opposition to the dominant culture. Taken together, these factors best explain the amount and intensity of hatred and anger the American public directed towards Michael Vick and his accomplices for their roles in the Bad Newz Kennels dogfighting operation. In addition to the activity itself, it is the reputations of the social groups practicing the activity that helps solidify condemnation from the dominant culture. Because young black males who identify with Hip-Hop are viewed by the mainstream as supporting an oppositional culture and because they hold a subordinate racial and socioeconomic status, they are constant targets for demonization and legal punishment.

American mainstream media outlets typically play a supporting role in constructing and reinforcing reality as defined by the power majority, who hold controlling interests through sponsorship and direct ownership. Analyzed coverage of Vick's involvement in the Bad Newz Kennels dogfighting operation shows how ideas and opinions that sought to contextualize dogfighting or even suggest sympathy for Vick were largely excluded and, in the few instances they did receive press, ridiculed and criticized. Furthermore, while race was not openly addressed in the analyzed articles from the three main publications (that is, none of the articles

levied attacks against Hip-Hop culture for its perceived affiliation with dogfighting), the comparisons of Vick in USA Today and ESPN news stories and editorial to several other vilified black sports figures, but to none who were white, showed that race was in fact salient in their coverage of the case.

The Michael Vick dogfighting case garnered a great deal of media coverage from April 2007 until Vick was sentenced to 23 months in federal prison the following December. As details of the case emerged the story began to transcend sports and became front page news. The involvement of Michael Vick, a star athlete and household name, in such an operation fueled outrage against a bloodsport that was already detested by most Americans. Mainstream media outlets from all across America jumped at the opportunity to scorn a deviant pastime and the fringe groups thought to be involved, namely young African-American males considered part of the Hip-Hop culture. Animal rights organizations acted opportunistically as well by taking advantage of the spotlight on the bloodsport by the Vick case to promote their anti-dogfighting and animal cruelty messages and raise their leaders' profiles.

This story was therefore symbolically meaningful in that it provided the public a specific case to hold up as an intolerable social problem. In the eyes of many, Vick served as the token representation of a young urban Hip-Hop black male who fought dogs and who therefore deserved strong and swift legal punishment. The press generated by his case brought greater attention to those trying to raise awareness against the bloodsport of dogfighting, which quickly led to stiffer penalties for participation in the practice, more law enforcement resources allocated to its eradication, and more dogfighting-related arrests (Jonsson 2009). On top of the outrage and media attention generated as a result of the animals involved in the bloodsport in question, the Michael Vick case offers a clear example of how unequal group power relations involving

social class, race, and culture can be magnified through actions of mainstream media. The actions of a high-profile individual helped galvanize public opinion to strengthen their opposition and align legislation with social norms. Although improved animal welfare will likely result from this heightened opposition, media outlets, the NFL, sports-related marketers, and animal rights organizations will also likely benefit from successfully condemning a “deviant” activity that no one would dare advocate in our time.

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## APPENDIX

### CODES USED IN CONTENT ANALYSIS

Appearance/condition of Vick's dogs: this code was given when an article discussed the appearance or condition of the dogs involved in the Bad Newz Kennels operation.

Attack of Vick's character/putting his character on trial: this code was given when Vick's character was attacked or put on trial in an article.

Call for more enforcement/stiffer penalties: code was given whenever an article contained a call for more enforcement of dogfighting laws or stiffer penalties for participation.

Charges: this code was given when the legal charges against Vick were stated in an article.

Comparison of dogfighting to other forms of animal cruelty: code was given whenever dogfighting was compared to other forms of animal cruelty or abuse.

Comparison of Vick to other vilified sports figures: code was given whenever Vick was compared to other vilified sports figures. Each time this code occurred the transgressing athlete he was compared to happened to be black.

Falcon's image: this code was given whenever Vick's team's image was mentioned or discussed.

Football/dogfighting comparison: this code was given when football and dogfighting were compared in any capacity in an article. This code appeared very rarely, only in two USA Today editorials and in one Daily Press article.

Gambling aspect: this code was given in any article where the gambling aspect of dogfighting, which Vick was involved, was brought up. Part of the significance of this is that gambling is against NFL rules.

Gore: this code was given whenever the gory aspects of the bloodsport of dogfighting were mentioned in an article, such as descriptions of how underperforming dogs were killed, and language used in stating that the underperforming dogs were killed. Highly descriptive terms contributed to the sensational tone of the coverage. Common examples include stating that pit bulls were killed by means of strangulation, hanging, and electrocution; and examples of possibly sensationalized language include references to the killings as "murders" and "executions."

Growing/widespread practice: code was given whenever it was stated in an article that dogfighting is a growing or widespread practice.

Illegality of dogfighting: this code was given when an article stated that dogfighting is in fact illegal and when an article clarified whether it was a misdemeanor or felony in a given location.

Innocent until proven guilty: this code was given when an article stated Vick was innocent until proven guilty. Stating this could have been done with the motive of making an article appear to be unbiased (whether that was in fact the case or not), although there is really no way to prove if stating this was ever done with such a motive in any of the articles which it appeared.

Loss of sponsors/Vick's marketing power: this code was given when an article mentioned that Vick had lost sponsors as a result of the dogfighting case or when his marketing power was discussed.

NFL discipline/conduct: this code was given whenever the NFL's personal conduct policy or the discipline Vick may face from the league appeared in the content of the articles.

NFL distancing/condemnation: this code was given whenever attempts from the NFL to distance themselves from transgressing players or to condemn them were mentioned in an article.

NFL's image: this code was given whenever the possible effects of Vick's implication in the dogfighting case on the NFL's image were mentioned or discussed.

Potential Punishment: this code was given whenever the legal punishment Vick was facing was discussed.

Putting Hip-Hop on trial: code was given whenever Hip-Hop was put on trial in an article due to its perceived affiliation with dogfighting.

Racial lines: code was given whenever race was brought into the discussion.

Role model/kids: code was given whenever the effects of the dogfighting case in regards to Vick's ability to be a role model or his influence on children who may look up to him were discussed.

Vick's background/cultural aspect: code was given whenever an article discussed Vick's background or the cultural aspect of dogfighting.

Vick bankrolled operation: this code was given whenever it was mentioned in an article that Vick was the member of the Bad Newz Kennels operation that funded the dogfighting activities.

Vick's image: code was given whenever Vick's image was mentioned or discussed.

Vick's NFL future: code was given whenever Vick's NFL future was discussed, including calls by individuals to ban him from the league for life.

What was discovered: this code was used whenever the evidence seized by authorities indicating dogs were being fought on Vick's property was mentioned. The mentioning of some of this

evidence such as break sticks and rape stands, especially if done so repeatedly by a publication, could have been done with the intention of sensationalizing.

VITA

WIL MASSEY

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