WHAT IF MICHAEL VICK WERE WHITE?

SINCE THE DAY HE WAS ARRESTED, PEOPLE HAVE BEEN ASKING THAT QUESTION. THE ANSWER ISN’T WHAT YOU THINK.

BY TOURÉ

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY D’ARCY HYDE
When Michael Vick plays, I see streetball. I don’t just mean that sort of football where you have to count to four-Mississippi before you can rush the quarterback, nearly everything breaks down and it’s all great fun. I also mean street basketball. Vick’s style reminds me of Allen Iverson—the speed, the court sense, the sharp cuts, the dekes, the swag. In those breath-taking moments when the Eagles QB abandons the pocket and takes off, it feels as if he’s thumbing his nose at the whole regimented, militaristic ethos of the game.

All of that is why, to me, Vick seems to have a deeply African-American approach to the game. I’m not saying that a black QB who stands in the pocket ain’t playing black. I’m saying Vick’s style is so badass, so artistic, so fluid, so flamboyant, so relentless—for representative of black athletic style—that if there were a stat for swagger points, Vick would be the No. 1 quarterback in the league by far.

Race is an undeniable and complex element of Vick’s story, both because of his style as well as the rarity of black QBs in the NFL. A decade after he became the first black QB to be drafted No. 1 overall, about one in five of the league’s passers is African-American, compared with two-thirds of all players. But after his arrest for dogfighting, so many people asked: Would a white football player have gotten nearly two years in prison for what Vick did to dogs?

This question makes me cringe. It is so facile, naive, shortsighted and flawed that it is meaningless. Whiteness comes with great advantages, but it’s not a get-out-of-every-crime-free card. Killing dogs is a heinous crime that disgusts and frightens many Americans. I’m certain white privilege would not be enough to rescue a white NFL star caught killing dogs.

The problem with the “switch the subject’s race to determine if it’s racism” test runs much deeper than that. It fails to take into account that switching someone’s race changes his entire existence. In making Vick white, you have him born to different parents. That alone sets his life trajectory in an entirely different direction. Thus when this hypothetical white Michael Vick … wait, I can’t even continue that sentence in good faith. I mean, who would this white Vick be? That person is unknowable. When you alter his race, it’s like those Back to the Future movies where someone goes back in time, inadvertently changes one small thing about his parents’ dating history and then the person starts to disappear. If Vick had been born to white parents, you wouldn’t even be reading this right now. That Vick would have had radically different options in life compared with the Vick who grew up in the projects of Newport News, Va., where many young black men see sports as the only way out.

This is not to say there aren’t insights to be gained from hypotheticals. One pertinent question: Would a white kid have been introduced to dogfighting at a young age and have it become normalized to the extent that he builds it into his life after he joins the NFL? It’s possible, but it’s far less likely because what made Vick stand out among dogfighters is less race than class. The deep pockets of an NFL star led to a kennel that was too big not to fail eventually. But if it did, though, would this white kid have been busted? Remember, it wasn’t suspicion of dogfighting that started the investigation that put Vick in jail. It was that element that we’ve all seen hold back or bring down so many athletes from the hood—the entourage. Vick’s cousin Davon Boddie was arrested and charged with possession of marijuana with intent to sell in Hampton, Va. When police asked him for his address, he led them to the home where Bad Newz Kennels was located. After that, Vick never had a chance.

So let’s look at him a different way. Let’s see him as someone in the third act of the epic movie that is his life, leading a team that many expect to see in the Super Bowl. Bob Marley’s “Redemption Song” is playing underneath because the humbled protagonist has finally overcome his personal demons and has begun living up to his athletic promise. And to those who believe we should judge a man by the worst life has to offer—with how he climbs after he hits rock bottom—Michael Vick has become heroic.

And that has nothing to do with race.