

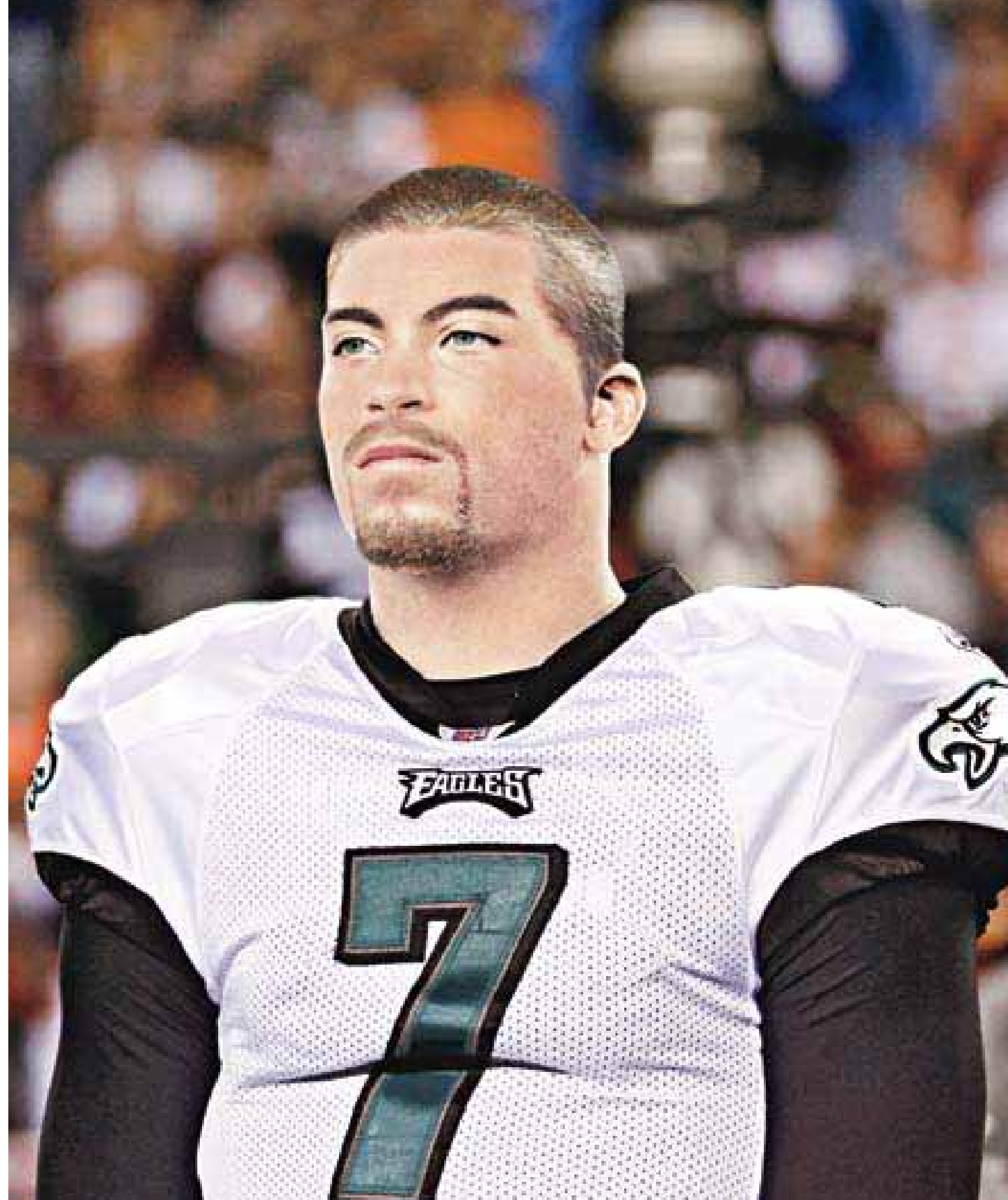


WHAT IF MICHAEL VICK WERE WHITE?

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 breathtaking 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—so 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, naïve, 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

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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.

Here's another question: If Vick grew up with the paternal support that white kids are more likely to have (72% percent of black children are born to unwed mothers compared with 29% of white children), would he have been involved in dogfighting? I ask this not to look for an excuse but to explore the roots of his behavior. Vick's stunningly stupid moral breakdown with respect to dogs is certainly related to the culture of the world he grew up in, which he says fully embraced dogfighting. But it's also related to the household he grew up in.

Vick's father, Michael Boddie, was not a positive influence on him growing up. Boddie admitted to *The Washington Post* that he was a cocaine user and had been high and drunk around young Vick. He says he often prepared the family garage so Vick could have pit bull fights there. Boddie's account is disputed by a family friend, who says Vick's mother would not have allowed that. Either way, at some point in Vick's youth, his father became estranged from the family. This breakdown of Vick's paternal relationship is a pattern that's all too common among black men of his generation. Too many are left to define manhood on their own, so they gravitate toward the most charismatic and inspiring men in their world. Sometimes those men are gritty local sports coaches who teach them the value of hard work, but sometimes they're ghetto celebrities who are unsavory role models with bad habits.

Ultimately, there is no separating Vick from his circumstances: his race, parents, economics and opportunities. Alter any of those elements and everything about him and how the world sees him would be unrecognizable.

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 how he responds when dealing with 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. 🌐