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Why we brought Vick into our classroom

By INGRID E. NEWKIRK

Dogfighting is a cowardly, despicable business. Yet, read blog comments and letters to the editor, or talk to folks gathered at the bus stop, and you will hear a smattering of remarks from people who show no embarrassment in demanding to know what the fuss is all about — or who try to turn ordinary outrage over cruelty to animals into a racial issue.

There is a difference of opinion, too, on what is at the root of the dogfighting problem.

Police officers in New York, Miami and other big cities where dying pit bulls, the losers, are discarded in alleyways call it an "urban phenomenon." Whoopi Goldberg, while appalled at cruelty to animals, opined that fighting dogs is one of those things that go on in the "Deep South." It is, she said, "a cultural thing." Russell Simmons, father of hip-hop and a vegetarian, argues that dogfighting is not cultur-



Michael Vick

al at all, as it's found in white trailer parks as often as in black neighborhoods.

In the end, none of the social analysis matters. What does matter is how to stop this vile blood "sport."

PETA's job is to try to open people's eyes — usually to things that they do not wish to see, such as the idea that every mammal and bird, every fish and reptile shares with humans the ability to suffer. It is a message many young people nowadays have never thought about.

At the age of 26, Michael Vick is among them.

That is one reason we approached him to take a course in empathy for animals, which we are asking the NFL to require all players to take, giv-

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en the list of abuses attributed to them lately. Vick had never thought of animals as fellow travelers, "caught with ourselves in the net of life and time," as the British philosopher Henry Beston described them.

After eight hours of watching video footage in which he saw elephants work cooperatively to rescue a foundering baby elephant from a mud hole and pigs become afraid after smelling a slaughterhouse passageway, Vick admitted that he had never considered such things. He ended up sharing examples from his own life about the loyalty of his aunt's dog and wondered aloud about how animals must feel when left outside on a cold wintry night or kept in a bar-

ren cage.

True, Vick had nothing to lose by taking PETA's course, unless you count losing the use of his cell phone for the day. He presented himself humbly, listened attentively and answered pointed questions, but we are not naive enough to imagine that we know what goes on in his head and heart.

He knew that PETA was not offering him a get-out-of-jail-free card. He knew that our position remains that he must serve a substantial sentence as a warning to others that money and stardom will not excuse heinous acts of wanton cruelty.

We gave him a way to understand the very nature of animals and the wrath directed at him, and we equipped him

with the words and stories he needs to convey to the awestruck kids he will meet in the Boys and Girls Clubs, the clear and unequivocal message that fighting dogs and treating animals cruelly is wrong, uncivilized and unacceptable because dogs have feelings just as humans do. He has pledged to do that.

The debate over whether Vick is redeemable rages on. We have done our best to open his eyes, mind and heart, and the course that he took is now available at PETA.org for anyone to take or teach.

Soon, the cell door will close on the Vick episode, but at least now there is a chance that the very man who funded one of the cruelest and largest dogfighting operations uncovered in this country will help steer children away from this bloody business.

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