

DEFENDING BLACK SPORTS JOURNALISTS
WHO AREN'T DEFENDING VICK

BY RON THOMAS, DIRECTOR, JOURNALISM & SPORTS PROGRAM

When a high-profile black athlete gets arrested, raising our racial antenna is black sports journalists' natural reaction. But not when it came to Atlanta Falcons icon Michael Vick, who proved to be an uncommon criminal.

When Spike Lee hosted Morehouse's "Forum on the Black Athlete" in May, at least half of the program was spent analyzing why black male professional athletes are getting arrested at an alarming rate.

Some panelists chastised athletes for making incredibly irresponsible decisions. Other panelists smacked down the white sporting press, stating that they take delight in further besmirching the image of black males. Several black sports journalists, including me, came across as staunch protectors of black men wearing cleats, spikes and sneakers.

It sounded noble, yet it felt uncomfortable. I left the Leadership Center hoping that aspiring journalists in the audience understood that black journalists' roles are to find the truth, add perspective and seek fairness regarding everyone we write about. Do that, I tell Morehouse's first year of journalism students, and undoubtedly racism and negative stereotyping will be uncovered along the way.

So when the federal indictment against Vick came down for financing and participating in dog fighting activities, some black sports journalists preached caution for good reason. If nothing else, history has taught us that "justice" for black men is a concept, not a fact. It's often wise



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to withhold opinions until guilt or innocence has been proven.

But Vick's offense – for six years funding an illegal business that trained dogs to kill and killed dogs that couldn't – rightly stripped many black sports journalists of their protective instinct.

He hadn't gotten into a spur-of-the-moment fight in a nightclub, been caught driving with a suspended license, or succumbed again to an addiction that had captured his soul. In the world of sports, that's common criminality, and often perspective has its place. Ten

years ago NBA star Latrell Sprewell choked his white coach, yet I wrote that P.J. Carlesimo wasn't the blameless victim because he'd been cursing out and humiliating his black players for more than a year. I wouldn't change a word.

Vick's case was different. Backed by the riches from a 10-year, \$130-million contract, he looked at all the investment opportunities within his grasp and chose extreme, perverse cruelty to animals. That's uncommonly criminal.

Black journalists still should critique his press coverage, which is what my basic

news writing class did the morning Vick filed his guilty plea. We questioned, for instance, why the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* ran a split-image photo of Vick a few days before. The good Vick was pictured in his helmet and face mask; the bad Vick was wearing a do-rag and earring. Did that create a stereotypical equation – do-rag + earring = criminal – or was that merely an artistic way of unpeeling a side of Vick that had been concealed from view?

For many black columnists, such a question was a minor issue. What disturbed Bryan Burwell of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, ESPN.com's Jemele Hill, the *Kansas City Star's* Jason Whitlock, and others (myself included), is that Vick had escaped the ghetto-glorified "thug life" and then chose to dash back into its clutches in a uniquely vile way.

When black athletes get involved in criminal activity, how much should black sports journalists condemn and how much should we defend? That's a mental tightrope, and I always fear falling too heavily on one side or the other.

In this situation, Vick's choice of a reprehensible second career has made my decision much easier. For him, my protective shield is much, much thinner than usual. ■

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