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Michael Vick Should Work, but Never Again in the NFL

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I believe in second chances. I believe that redemption is the soul of hope. I believe debts paid warrant fresh starts.

Except when it comes to Michael Vick.

He has served his time, endured his punishment, expressed his remorse and has a right to make a living. But the owners of every National Football League franchise have an equal right to say: he won't earn that living here.

An NFL team is as much a part of a city as its skyline. It is bound up in history, identity, and self-confidence. It is a source of great pride, great pain and loving obsession. NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell said that being part of all that is "a privilege."

There are times when great privilege, once squandered, should never be extended again.

Sure, you can argue precedent. Players have committed crimes, hurt others and behaved stupidly (sometimes serially) and been allowed back in to the select club of young men who make millions doing a job they love, and for which they are greatly loved in return.

This is different.

Michael Vick did not make "a mistake." He did not use "bad judgment." He did not exercise "poor choices."

He ran a long-term, well-planned, well-funded criminal enterprise that was awesome in its cruelty.

It's been two years since his arrest. And time can dull the outrage.

So let's revisit the victims.

Of the 49 dogs saved, only one was so vicious it had to be euthanized. Twenty five went directly to experienced, carefully selected foster homes. The remaining 21, mainly because they were animal-aggressive, went to rehab at Dogtown, a state-of-the-art, no-kill sanctuary in Utah. A few will live out their lives there. The rest are expected to be adopted. A number have become therapy dogs -- surprising unless you know pit bulls are, by nature, slobberingly affectionate toward people.

Dogtown's trainers say the dogs were "shutdown" when they arrived -- confused, afraid and prone to panic at the slightest noise or the flick of a light. Thanks to the patience and dedication of a caring staff, they have started to shake off their trauma.

Nobody knows what they were called -- if anything -- when they were starved, living in the open, attached by heavy chains to buried car axels.

Now they have names ... like Sweet Pea ... and Georgia ... and Lucas. They suffered in ways we'd rather not think about ... and have the scars to prove it. Others never made it off the property, killed, at least eight by Vick personally, because they lost a fight or failed an audition.

I know this is old news. I know that Michael Vick has paid a steep price in lost time and lost treasure. I know that these are "only dogs."

But as Vick becomes a free man cleared to pursue his vocation, it is important to remember what happened to living creatures in the pits, the black-roofed shacks and the woods behind his home.

It is important because there is a question on the table, and every owner of an NFL team must answer it. Is a man with the proven capacity for such wanton, sustained, cruelty someone who deserves a place among those you have hand-picked to represent you, your business, your family and your city?

In answering that question, I hope every single owner shows that some things have greater value than fast-twitch muscles and a bionic arm.