Michael Vick Case Study

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In 2007 a great financial burden swept across the United States. For many Americans, what is known as the recession is what the year 2007 reminds them of. During this time, companies and families struggled to get through. Unemployment rates were continuously increasing. This crisis is often rated just under the Great Depression. With so much crisis going on across the United States as a whole, it is wonder how many more individual ones could still occur. However, in the football world, 2007 was a time for even more crises. Football fans will immediately think back to an animal cruelty scandal involving a Michael Vick, a previously cherished football player.

 Michael Vick was born in June of 1980 in Newport News, Virginia. He grew up to attend Virginia Tech and play football there, alongside his brother. Michael is the father of two children, one of which was with his wife Kijafa. In 2001, Vick was the first overall pick during the first round of the NFL draft. He played for the Atlanta Falcons from 2001 to 2009. Later, he would also play for the Philadelphia Eagles, New York Jets, and Pittsburgh Steelers, before retiring from his football career. Currently, Vick holds the record for most career rushing yards by a quarterback. Michael Vick was well known and loved by football fans. He was constantly in the public eye and had become a famous athlete. All this changed come 2007. The first concerning incident happened in 2006, slightly over one year before his main crisis hit. In 2006, after a loss to the New Orleans Saints, Vick made an obscene gesture to the fans at the game. He quickly made a public apology and the upset was gracefully forgotten (“Michael Vick Fast Facts”, 2016).

 About a year later, Vick was not given the same grace by the public. In April of 2007, allegations arose claiming Vick’s involvement in animal cruelty. Vick and two others, Quanis Phillips and Purnell Peace, were thought to be involved in illegal dogfighting and gambling (“Michael Vick Fast Facts, 2016). Police had raided his house in Surry County, Virginia and found 66 dogs and dog fighting training equipment (Grano, 2014). From that day, his life spiraled out of control quickly. On July 17th Vick appeared in court on a conspiracy count. A few days later on the 23rd, he was told to stop coming for training camp, while the NFL looked into his case. Three days later, Vick plead not guilty in court and was sent home. About a month later, Vick’s co-defendants plead guilty and admit their involvement in the conspiracy. Unfortunately for Michael, both men identified him as also being involved. Vick then decided to submit a guilty plea and admit to the dogfighting conspiracy, including being involved in killing dogs and illegal gambling. Once admitted, the NFL suspended him indefinitely with no pay. August 27, 2007 Michael Vick pleads guilty in federal court and is charged with killing dogs and promoting dog fights. After Vick publicly apologizes to the NFL and Atlanta Falcons, he completed a course in empathy and animal protection. In December of 2007, Michael Vick was sentenced to 23 months in federal prison (“Michael Vick Fast Facts”, 2016).

 Michael’s past dates back to his rookie year of professional football. From 2001-2007, Vick and three others, Purnell Peace, Quanis Phillips, and Tony Taylor, were running an illegal dogfighting business. In that time they trained around 50 dogs, killed multiple from lack of performance, and conducted a gambling ring. The dogs were put under extreme measures of cruelty. Vick and his partners often killed the dogs through hanging, drowning, shooting, or electrocution. It was also speculated that the men would fight their trained pit bulls with regular pet dogs. They found the fear in the regular dogs and fierce attack of the pit bulls to be humorous. Vick and his companions did not only battle in their facility but would travel to compete as well, taking the dogs over state lines and continuing to participate in illegal fights. All of this operated under the name, Bad Newz Kennels. They set up their business in Surry County, Virginia. The operation was found out due to another investigation. Vick’s cousin, Davon Boddie, was arrested on drug charges. Upon his arrest, he gave Michael’s address as his own. While searching the home for drugs, they found dogfighting materials instead. If this event would not have occured, their business would have gone undetected for a more extensive period of time. After some investigation, the federal government brought charges against Vick and his accomplices. (“Animal Fighting Case Study”).

 On May 20th, 2009, he is released from prison and is sent home to Virginia. Shortly after, he was released from the Atlanta Falcons and available to sign with a different team. In July, the NFL commissioner, Goodell, reinstates Vick into the NFL on a conditional basis. Once reinstated, the Philadelphia Eagles sign Vick as a quarterback (“Michael Vick Fast Facts”, 2016). Though back to his profession, Vick still had not made a full recovery. There were television shows talking about him which kept his crisis in the public eye. It was not until 2011 that he was asked to sign an endorsement contract and represent a company again. The outcome of this case is interesting to analyze. After his prison sentence, Vick faced some scrutiny and challenges, but did overcome them. He was quickly signed on to another football team and once again began playing. Though many former fans were still disappointed, his career was not badly damage. Vick had to work to get back endorsements and the public’s support, however, a few years later he succeeded in that task. After his first endorsement with a football pad company, he then signed back on with Nike and once again became a Nike athlete. Michael Vick took a few major steps back in his career, but he smoothly and quickly made his way back into a more positive spotlight.

How Vick saved his public reputation and professional appearance is the work of his many public relations workers he hired shortly after his prison release. When Michael Vick’s case first appeared, the media grabbed ahold of it quickly. The social issues presented in the media reflect societies concerns (Wyler, Blackmore, and Kaskey, 2013). In the United States there are more dogs and dog owners than any other nation (Grano, 2014). America did not take the news of involvement in animal cruelty lightly. Dogs are said to be “man’s best friend” and are usually “part of the family”. Animal protection stories increased and became a hot topic. Media has a strong presence and in today’s society, “Media tells society what is hot, what is hip, what matters…” (Wyler, Blackmore, and Kaskey, 2013). With this story on the rise, media was able to dig in and keep this crisis in the news. They sparked an interest and gave their audience information on the culture that surrounds the “sport”, the techniques used, and the emotional and physical toll it takes on the dogs. Vick’s story fueled inspiration for the media and resulted in a lasting coverage.

With so much media coverage his public relations team worked hard. Soon after his release from prison, Vick self-subjected himself to a surveillance based program of social testing designed to prove he had genuine remorse. Before being released from his sentence, the NFL commissioner, Roger Goodell, visited Vick. In order to reinstate him into the football league, Vick would have to show regret for his actions. Once reinstated into the football league, he took time to get back into his sport and train. He tried to gain back his skills that faded due to his prison time.

Though Vick was seen in a negative light, he and his team worked hard from the time he was in jail until now. He went through stages of the crisis plan. Vick and his team first owned up to his mistakes. He plead guilty and served his time as ordered. He fully cooperated with the investigation and was open to the media. He conducted news conferences to apologize to his team and the NFL. After he was released, he continued to work on his reputation. Starting in football, Vick took courses and allowed for strict regulations to prove his worthiness. He worked hard to get back to top performance and become a great player again.

A few years later, Vick began working on his reputation once again. After he was back to being the talented, focused footballer player fans and the NFL enjoyed, he began to think about himself apart from football. “A star sells an image” (Grano, 2014). Being a public image, Vick had more work to repair an image than simply being a good player. The public praises a star for their talent but respects them for their image as whole, including personal ethics. Michael Vick began building a relationship with the Humane Society. He supported new movements to end cruelty. In 2015, Vick met with Pennsylvania law makers in support of the Pennsylvania house bill 1516. This bill protects pets from neglectful owners. It provides the police the ability to break in to a car in order to save an animal in unfit temperatures (Bonesteel, 2015). He also supported the Animal Fighting Spectator Prohibition Act. This act directly influences what he was accused of. In this act, attending an organized animal fight would be a criminal offense. This act was officially past by President Obama in 2014. (Bonesteel, 2015).

At first glance, Vick’s actions may seem contradictory with his past. People may view his efforts of reputation repair as only for the media and public. If his efforts were not seen as sincere, he would not be accepted back into the hearts of the fans. Aware of this, Vick stated, “I know I am an unlikely advocate. I was part of the problem. Now, my perspective can help reach people that activists cannot reach. I can help others become agents of change” (Bonesteel, 2015). Michael Vick is specifically using his past to help convince people of his ethical change. By talking about changing others, he is reflecting his own personal change. In order to accurately help others and be passionate for their change, one must be genuine. Vick also spoke openly about his past by saying, “I cannot take it back. The only thing I can do is influence the masses of kids from going down the same road I went down” (Bonesteel, 2015). For both the NFL and the general public, Vick had to be genuine and convince people to forgive. By getting involved in public matters, especially pertaining to his personal crisis, he was able to show his regrets for his actions and prove that he wants to move on in a more positive light.

The use of transcendence was present throughout his comeback. Transcendence is when someone takes their reputation out of the negative setting and puts it into one that is more positive and accepted. According to Merriam-Webster, the term transcendence can be defined as, “extending or lying beyond the limits”. In terms of crisis communication, the limits are the negative associations to the name or brand. Vick took his image out of the animal cruelty concept and instead made sure to be the guy who is hard working and a good player. He focused on his career and giving back to his fans. He then later took himself out of the animal abuser title and began to rebrand himself as a person who fights against such things. Michael Vick replaced his negative reputation with one that supports community and more specifically, animal safety.

During the rebranding process, Vick played off of ethos and pathos. Ethos is the referral to ethics. On the other hand, pathos revolves around emotions. By supporting animal rights and fighting against cruelty, he is appealing to ethos and convincing the public that he has reevaluated his personal ethics. He is advocating for what people agree with and is the right thing to do. He publicly supported laws and showed his involvement. He claimed his involvement could be beneficial to the ethics of others as well. The crisis in itself plays strongly towards pathos. Emotions are high when talking about cruelty and abuse towards any living being. Society often views animals as something they are responsible for and should protect. For example, endangered species are closely watched and sponsored by the public. In this case, dogs are close to humans. They form bonds and relationships that many other animals do not share. For Vick, his case strongly went against what the public values.

One common practice with crisis communication, is to stay open and vulnerable to the public. By remaining open about the situation, the public learns to trust what is being said. A common rule is to never utter the words, “no comment.” Throughout the entire case, Vick and his team remained open towards media. He addressed the issue when it first came up and answered questions whenever asked. After his time in prison, Vick still remains heavily in the media, however, he focuses on the changes in the situation. Whereas before he apologized, he later spent his time explaining the positive outcome that has come out of the crisis. Vick said that he was able to reach people who are not easy to reach. He never denied his involvement, but instead used his negative past to help others create a more positive future. He is now speaking out against everything he has done and hopes to shine more light onto the issues that easily goes undetected. Using his reputation, he can become an advocate for change and show how it is possible to change yourself and situation. By remaining open, the media has learned to trust him and the public is able to see a genuine side. If Vick can be seen as genuine and remorseful, he can be forgiven. By becoming involved in the Human Society, Vick showed that he is going to go beyond apologies to make up for his past (Sports, 2014).

The association with a crisis will remain no matter what is done (Anderson, 2007). However, though his negative reputation will always be there slightly, he has the opportunity to change around the general perception. With strong media coverage, he can reach a new audience as well as the old one. Vick is able to gain supporters for his actions that being accomplished today and let his old actions lay in the past. In this case, the main crisis is saving his reputation (Anderson, 2007). To help explain, Anderson wrote, “A reputation once broken may possibly be repaired. But the world will always keep its eyes on the spot where the crack was” (Anderson, 2007). In the end, Michael Vick and his team of crisis communication managers accomplished the overarching task of saving his name. Though it is forever tarnished, they have created a reputation that is focused on change and rebranding. A bad history does not necessarily mean a bad present or future.

Michael Vick is not the only one affected by the animal cruelty crisis. The NFL, National Football League, also had to clean up and repair a reputation. Though they did not receive the same repercussions as Vick did, people still did not respond well to the organization. For years, the NFL supported Vick and his career. They built his reputation as an amazing football player and a beloved celebrity. Once the news of the scandal broke, the NFL’s reaction was carefully evaluated as well. Since there are many different disasters that can occur throughout the sports industry, different plans are often already created. The Major League Baseball policy has a mourning period in place if ever a player dies or is in a serious accident. The National Basketball League calls a disaster draft to occur if ever a team needs to replace the majority of players. Out of all the sports leagues, the National Football League is known for the most detailed disaster plan. The NFL rates their disasters and classifies them in one of three groups (Perez, 2016). During a crisis, fans will look at the NFL to see how they handle it (Sports, 2014). In this situation, Vick’s reputation was not the only one on the line. Fans lost trust in Vick but also lost respect for the league that made Vick famous.

Unfortunately, Vick’s scandal was not the only one that year for the NFL. While Michael Vick was caught for illegal dog fighting, Plaxico Burres accidently discharged a gun in public and Steve McNair was murdered. There was a high probability of fans backlashing on the NFL and resulting in a distrust of the league’s players as a whole. However, through all the media coverage between the different events, the situations were not connected. Media had the power to connect the cases and blaming the industry for the downfall. Instead, they focused the cases on the players and separated the celebrities from their line of work (Oriard, 2007). This positively impacted the NFL. Not one of the cases gravely impacted the league. In fact, in 2007, amidst the recession in the economy and the football crises, the NFL’s franchise value actually increased. Though the recession caused the attendance at games to decrease, the number of television viewers grew (Oriard, 2007). The NFL was fortunate to be thriving, however, they were still in a vulnerable position.

Though the cases exposed the league to possible threats, Roger Goodell did what he could to solidify a trustworthy reputation. Roger Goodell is the commissioner of the NFL. He started the job in 2006 and is still the commissioner today. Through the different crises that have occurred, Roger created a status of being tough on crime (Oriard, 2007). With such a reputation, fans can trust the league to handle problems with grace and dignity. In the case of Michael Vick, Goodell suspended Vick from the league. By doing this, the league proved to fans that they did not accept or support such actions.

Goodell’s response to Vick’s actions did not end at the suspension, nor was his work over after Vick went to jail. Upon Vick’s release from jail, Goodell met with him to analyze how genuine and remorseful Vick truly was (Grano, 2014). He needed to show significant change in order for the NFL to forgive him of his actions and reinstate him as a player. Goodell announced that he would assign league officials to monitor Vick’s private affairs. Upon his release Vick agreed to the surveillance programs. Goodell reinstated Vick into the NFL in 2009, but on a strict conditional bases (“Vick Cleared”, 2009). Vick was allowed to interact in activities and practice with a team, however, he was not allowed to play in a game until further evaluation. After speaking to different coaches and players, Goodell decided Vick had shown enough change and remorse to be officially reinstated in the league (“Vick Cleared”, 2009).

Through the Michael Vick animal cruelty crisis of 2007, the nation watched a man change and strengthen his ethics and a league push a player to better his life. The NFL did not just focus on their league, but truly wanted to see Vick change for the better. As for Vick, he used his time in jail as a time of reflection. He came out with a new dedication to helping others stay away from the mistakes me made and trying to protect the dogs he once would have hurt. In the end, this case was handled responsibly for every party involved. The efforts involved lead to a second chance and the public accepting what had occurred (Sports, 2014). The NFL has faced many crises in the past and continues to face more today. Their commissioner, Goodell, takes a responsible role and projects the organization from raising controversy. The forgiveness that Vick received was due to the work of Goodell, league officials and mentors, the Humane Society, and himself (Grano, 2014). There were a lot of aspects that occurred in order to repair Vick’s reputation. The crisis was successfully taken care of through a mixture of all these aspects. Though the event will never be forgotten, Vick has a second chance and can make his name a more positive one once again.

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