

7-25-2007

## Dogfighting culture

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### Recommended Citation

Crepeau, Richard C., "Dogfighting culture" (2007). *On Sport and Society*. 753.  
<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/onsportandsociety/753>

SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE  
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JULY 25, 2007

It's difficult to know what to say about the Michael Vick story, and it might be wise to say nothing just yet. It does, however, bring to the forefront some interesting bits of history concerning what constitutes sport, the relationship of sport to gambling, the confluence of sport and masculinity, the evolution of what is seen as civilized and barbaric behavior, and the ways in which people react to that behavior.

Dog fighting has a long history reaching back at least into the Roman Empire, into medieval England, colonial America, 16th century Japan, and many other places. It is, or has been, popular in a variety of societies and cultures across the world. Dog fighting was often associated with bear and bull baiting, as well as ratting in Britain and the U.S. In the "sport" of ratting, a dog was put in a pit with rats and the object was to see how many rats the dog could kill, usually within a given time frame. Dog fighting in its many forms has been closely associated with gambling, which has been the single most important force driving sport over the centuries.

Beginning in the late 18th and early 19th century, dog fighting, the baiting sports, and blood sports in general began to fall into disfavor. Some would trace this to the rise of the Victorian culture and its obsession with respectability. Forms of cruelty of all kinds were increasingly seen as beyond the pale and laws began to appear to control these forms of human behavior.

More concern seemed to focus on cruelty to animals than to humans, a tendency still with us in the early 21st century. Cruelty to animals was increasingly described as uncivilized or barbaric, especially as a form of entertainment. Social reformers, both evangelical Christians and humanitarians, who saw this as part of a larger crusade to clean up society and infuse it with Christian values, drove the attack on blood sports.

Laws did not succeed in stopping dogfights, they simply drove dog fighting to the margins of society where it attracted those looking for a thrilling and slightly illegal sort of activity, a characteristic that seems the want of humans. Dog fights, ratting, bear baiting, cockfights, bare knuckle boxing, and eye

gouging fights, as well as many other less respectable and illegal forms of sport and entertainment, became the province of males in a 19th century Victorian culture. This development accompanied a growing fear of "feminization," of the culture and a corresponding concern over "masculinity" among the middle and upper classes.

For the 19th century urban bachelor culture and for the Victorian gentlemen of the age, illicit forms of sport and gambling, along with prostitution and drugs, filled their needs. Victorian gentlemen moved in these circles as a rite of passage into adulthood, and the bachelor culture moved in these circles to express their manliness as well. In many ways, much of this dynamic continues to fuel the illegal blood sports in urban industrial and post-industrial cultures, as do other sports which feature forms of ritualized violence.

This segment of society is, in fact, only one part of the clientele attracted to dog fighting. Most studies of contemporary dog fighting, as well as most court and police records, indicate that dog fighting cuts across race and class and has a very wide appeal in the United States. In much that has been written about the Michael Vick affair the implication has been that dog fighting is an activity beyond the pale and those involved in it are barbaric or savage in their behavior. From one perspective that may well be the case, but when looking at the growing popularity of dog fighting and who is involved in it, there is no typical dog-fighting aficionado. Those from the boardroom, those from the sports and entertainment world, those from the city and from the country, the upper, middle and lower classes are all represented. Indeed, the hip-hop culture has recently intersected with the dog fighting culture.

In my own experience in Florida, I know there has been a very strong dog fighting culture in the past, although it may have faded as the state has changed. Dog fighting had its center in the Central Florida area. There were at least two regular newsletters published promoting and defending dog fighting, and in the mid-70s it was decidedly white in its public racial persona. However, the segregation of the society was still lingering and the general absence of information on activity in the African-American community was still the norm in the public media, except when reporting crime, so this may be a skewed picture.

There was a major bust of a dog-fighting ring that took place in the late 70s or early 80s in Christmas, Florida, where the

fights were run in association with an alligator attraction. I don't remember the specifics of the case but I do remember that the dogfights attracted very large crowds, and they were well armed with an amazing variety of weaponry. Gambling was a major component of the activity. Anywhere from \$10,000 on up could be at stake on a normal weekend at a dogfight in Central Florida. Police reports now indicate the stakes of over \$100,000 are quite common across the country. Indeed, gambling and drugs have become closely associated with the dog-fighting scene.

Dog fighting is illegal, but it attracts many ordinary people. Many of those involved in dog fighting talk about their special relationship with their dogs and how they love their dogs. This may seem insane to many of us, but that does not mean they are not sincere in their feelings.

None of this is written to justify what is a despicable and illegal activity and clearly beyond the pale in the modern world. It is only written to point out that in some times and places, and in some cultures and subcultures, people do things that seem quite hideous to others. The point is that dog fighting is not an aberration in our society and those involved in it are not monsters or uncivilized people. Michael Vick is not the first athlete to be arrested on dog fighting charges in recent years. Nor will he be the last.

The final point I want to make relates to the reactions to this case. Why is it that when dogs are abused by athletes there are protests everywhere, calls for the immediate suspension of the player, and a loud condemnation of the actions, but when an athlete abuses a spouse or a female friend the public outcry is considerably less? Is that a statement about social values, or is it something else?

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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