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May 1, 2013
Case Study: Public Relations

Michael Vick: Rising From The Ashes

Public figures, like athletes, entertainers, and politicians, must be vigilant in protecting their brand. Whether it be coaches, publicists, agents, lawyers, or managers, there is usually a team of people working around the clock to protect that brand. What are they protecting it from, exactly? Simply put, anything that puts the brand in jeopardy. Scandals have ruined political careers, character issues have ruined numerous athletes' chances of joining new teams, and temperamental actresses have been blackballed from various studios.

Athletes are a little different. Athletes are warriors, gladiators. You see them struggle, you see them triumph, and you see them give it their all in a way that you simply can't see with other public figures. Athletes also have a definitive scoreboard to tell you, the observer, how they're doing. Movie stars have opening weekend box offices, and politicians may have elections once every few years to determine a victor, but we are bombarded with athletes and their weekly, or daily conquests of greatness on the field of play. It's a regular opportunity for redemption, an ongoing opportunity to right the ship, so to speak. In fact, I believe, that athletes have an easier time recovering from a scandal that is damaging to the brand, as long as they stay out of trouble off the field, and win on the field. "Just Win, Baby" as the late Oakland Raiders owner Al Davis would often say. It's a formula that has worked for athletes often.

Michael Vick is a perfect example of this "Just Win, Baby" rehabilitation plan. Born in the poverty-stricken town of Newport News, Virginia ("NewportNam" as he refers to it in his book, *Finally Free*), he was surrounded by violence and exposed to so much that it would become the groundwork for all his future legal issues. The number one pick in the 2001 NFL

Draft, Vick became a human highlight reel for the Atlanta Falcons, churning out endless “did you just see that” moments in his young, electrifying career. He became an instant fan favorite. His jersey sales were near the top of the NFLShop.com sales list every year, he had lucrative endorsement deals, popular commercials, was the cover boy for the EA Sports Madden video game franchise, and a recipient of a \$100 million football contract. While with the Falcons, Vick’s endorsers consisted of Nike, Coca-Cola, Powerade, Kraft, Rawlings, Hasbro, and AirTran. Vick was one of the NFL’s biggest stars, and their biggest “must-see TV” asset in a league full of them.

Like a lot of athletes who are unprepared for the public eye when handed boatloads of money, Vick began to get into some trouble. Between 2005-2007, he was arrested for possession of marijuana in an airport, was reprimanded by the NFL for giving fans at the Georgia Dome the finger (he wasn’t telling them they were number one, either), and quickly becoming the poster child for rebellious behavior, much like Virginia’s other native son, Allen Iverson, was doing in the NBA. However, those transgressions seemed trivial compared to what followed.

Everything came to a dramatic halt in 2007, when Vick was arrested for his role in a dog-fighting ring in which he pled guilty to not only the organization of these activities, but to the cruel torture and murder of numerous dogs. Vick would serve two years in prison, losing two years of his prime, and becoming one of the most hated athletes the country has ever seen. Coca-Cola, AirTran, Kraft, and the other companies dropped Vick amid the scandal. Nike would eventually follow suit, as they dropped Vick and abandoned the release of his new shoe, the Nike Zoom Vick V. PETA planned a protest outside NFL Headquarters in July 2007 which consisted of about 75 protesters holding up signs saying, “NFL: Sack Vick,” a preview of what was to come for Vick.

When Vick was released from prison in 2009, and sought a return to the NFL, he knew it would not be easy, and proving to NFL coaches and executives that his talent was still there would only be one part of his road to redemption. He needed to work on re-building his image completely. He claimed, "I had no margin for error," and this was true both on the field as well as off the field regarding his image. From a PR standpoint, he needed to accomplish a myriad of different objectives, including a sincere apology, credible acts that made his apology come to life, a mentor that gave him credibility, and getting rid of all the baggage of his "bad boy" days. From a football standpoint, he needed to go to an organization with a strong foundation from the owner down to the head coach, who could not only ease Vick back on the field, but help guide him in the right direction off the field as well.

One of the first steps in that process was aligning himself with a credible mentor who would guide him on his personal road to recovery, not just his professional path. That person was former NFL head coach Tony Dungy. Vick never played for Dungy, but they admired each other from afar. Dungy, a devout Christian who "likes to go around, spreading the gospel," he says, was a perfect fit for Vick who was in desperate need of guidance. Dungy sought out Vick, visiting him in Leavenworth, Kansas, while incarcerated, where they spent nearly three hours talking about everything from family, to football, to God. It was Dungy who personally oversaw the progress in Vick's life and who personally recommended him to any potential NFL team interested in his services and to the commissioner when it was time to reinstate him. According to Vick, he's not sure he would have gotten the second chance if not for Coach Dungy taking him under his wing and helping him change his ways.

According to Vick and his agent, Joel Siegal, the two teams who were most interested in Vick's services were the Buffalo Bills and Cincinnati Bengals. The Eagles' interest in Vick was

well-hidden, even Vick was not aware, because they had entrenched starter Donovan McNabb, and second-round pick Kevin Kolb waiting in the wings. Vick would eventually land with the Philadelphia Eagles, much to the insistence of then-coach, Andy Reid. Eagles owner Jeffrey Lurie knew the type of PR hit he would take for bringing Vick on to the team, so he sat down with Vick and needed to be convinced that he was a changed man and would do whatever was necessary to rehabilitate his image. It was the perfect scenario for Vick in two ways. He would be able to spend time getting back into football shape, as he was not being asked to step in right away and contribute. He was also able to focus on his work in the community and lay the foundation for what would be his image rehabilitation. And, if he could convince a skeptical Lurie, he knew he could forge a future with other skeptics, of which there were many.

After signing with the Eagles, Vick had to serve a league suspension for the first three games of the 2009 season. As Lurie expected, the backlash was immediate. People were actively protesting outside Lincoln Financial Field before every game, holding up signs of dogs that were mistreated and encouraging the masses to join in their crusade against Vick. When the 2009 season ended, Vick played only sparingly that season, taking his time to get his football legs under him, but was relentless off the field, where he took pride in re-building his tarnished reputation.

The court of public opinion was not ruling in Vick's favor, but there were people rooting for him. Vick found an unlikely supporter in President Obama. When Obama was talking to Eagles owner Jeffrey Lurie about the alternative energy that the Eagles were using in their facilities, Vick's name came up in conversation. According to Jeffrey Lurie's recounting of the conversation to *Sports Illustrated's* Peter King, the President said, "So many people who serve time never get a fair second chance." Obama applauded the Eagles and according to Lurie, "he

was happy that we did something on such a national stage that showed our faith in giving someone a second chance after such a major downfall.”

This comment caused a stir on talk radio and other people began speaking out in opposition of Vick. One in particular was Fox News talk show host Tucker Carlson who vehemently disagreed with the President’s comments and was candid about his thoughts on Vick’s second chance. “Michael Vick killed dogs, and he did it in a heartless and cruel way,” Carlson said on the air. “I think, personally, he should’ve been executed for that.” A bit extreme, wishing death upon another human being, but Carlson was not alone in his public opposition to Vick. Chicago White Sox pitcher Mark Buehrle was one of those who was outspoken in his hatred for Vick. Buehrle and his wife, both dog lovers, said that while they watched games in 2010, they admitted that they were hoping Vick would be injured. When given the chance to retract their statements, they didn’t.

As the 2010 season approached, and long-time quarterback Donovan McNabb was jettisoned to the rival Washington Redskins via trade, Vick was second on the depth chart behind Kevin Kolb who was getting his chance to be the starter after backing up McNabb for years. The fan-base had yet to embrace Vick and forgive him for his transgressions.

I worked for the Eagles in their Premium Sales Department during the 2010 season and witnessed first hand the backlash the Eagles faced. When speaking to prospective clients in the months leading up to the 2010 season, I would routinely hear things like “Not until Vick’s off the team,” “Is Vick still on the team...then no,” and “I would love to, but I can’t support a team that has Michael Vick on it.” In 2010 the community, and the country at large, were still reeling from the economic recession and that would be the most common answer for when businesses would turn down the opportunity to purchase season tickets. Vick’s presence on the team was a close

second. There was a large portion of the community that would not support the team financially as long as Vick was still on the roster.

In the 2010 season opener, when everyone was ready for Kevin Kolb's coming out party, it was Vick who stole the show. Kolb suffered a concussion early in the game and Vick was thrust into action. He nearly pulled off a come from behind win against the eventual Super Bowl Champion Green Bay Packers. Vick took the reigns as the starter while Kolb nursed his injury for a few games and he never looked back. He posted the best numbers of his career by far, finishing second in league MVP voting, and he led the Eagles to the playoffs in one of the most exciting regular seasons in recent Eagles history.

Before the 2010 season reached its halfway point, with Vick putting up astronomical numbers and leading the Eagles to victory, there was a noticeable spike in Vick's popularity. Local sporting good stores started ordering loads of Vick paraphernalia. Following a Week 9 victory against Peyton Manning and the Indianapolis Colts, NFL.com reported that Vick's Eagles jersey moved into the Top 10 in sales, along with Vick being one of the most searched players on the site, NFLShop.com. By the end of the season, some endorsers began to crawl back. Smaller companies, such as Unequal Technologies, MusclePharm, and Cure Auto Insurance stepped up in support of Vick by signing him to endorsement deals. In 2011, Vick struck a deal to return to Nike. It paled in comparison to Vick's previous deal with Nike which included a signature shoe and apparel with his logo, but Nike's presence on Vick's resume was a huge step in making him more appealing to the masses.

In an interview with the New York Times, Saint Joseph's University marketing professor John Lord would echo this "Just Win, Baby" theory by saying, "on-field performance is always going to trump off-the-field situations." He couldn't have been more accurate in the case of

Michael Vick. The success of the 2010 season provided a launching pad for Vick, the brand, just as much as it did for Vick, the football player. This was a guy who months before the season started, was voted as the most hated athlete in sports, according to a *Forbes* poll. Upon the completion of the 2010 season, Vick was the second leading vote-getter for the NFL Pro Bowl, the All-Star Game in Hawaii where players are voted on by fans and coaches around the league, only behind Tom Brady. “To tell the truth, I’m changing my attitude a little.” Lord continued. “I’m more willing to forgive and forget because that seems to be where the momentum is going.” He wasn’t alone in that regard. The way Vick played in that 2010 season would turn out to be one of, if not the biggest, factor in his return to the good graces of so many people in America.

Eagles beat reporter and *Philadelphia Magazine* journalist Sheil Kapadia shared his insight on Vick’s success being directly related to Vick’s rise in popularity. “It’s definitely true that winning on the field earns goodwill with the fan-base, whether people want to admit it or not,” Kapadia said. He also talked about the importance of Vick’s openness to talk about his past and his relationship with the media. “He’s been as open and available as any player on the team,” Kapadia said. “He’s answered questions about his past, being benched (in 2012), the team’s poor performance and everything in between.” While discussing the importance of the way someone in crisis would interact with the media in his book *Damage Control*, renowned crisis counselor Eric Dezenhall said, “getting to reporters first with your perspective doesn’t guarantee you positive coverage, but it does significantly increase your chances.” That would end up being a big part of Vick’s strategy, his openness and honesty about all of his mistakes.

When you’re dealing with a situation this severe, on-the-field success needs to be supplemented by intense work off the field as well. Vick’s most successful and important public relations move was the relationship he forged with the Humane Society of the United States. The

Humane Society is a national organization that provides protection for animals. Through the rescuing of various types of animals and shelters they have set up around the country, they are out in the forefront against animal cruelty and in the protection of all types of animals. Wayne Pacelle, president and chief executive officer of the Humane Society of the United States, visited Vick while he was incarcerated in Leavenworth, Kansas. According to Vick, they forged a partnership right there in that visitation area. Pacelle wanted Vick to be headstrong in his rehabilitation post-incarceration, and he was willing to help in any way he could.

Vick would become a spokesperson for the Humane Society, conducting regular speaking engagements, particularly with at-risk youth in poverty-stricken areas to warn them about the perils of dogfighting and doing the right thing. Wayne told Vick, according to Vick, “he was going to give me a chance to change a lot of lives of both people and dogs around the world - to change the perception of pit bulls and to help eradicate dogfighting.” Vick has spoken at more than 30 Humane Society events upon his release from prison, with no signs of slowing down.

Les Bowen, Eagles beat reporter for the *Philadelphia Daily News*, provided incredible insight for these speeches, many of which he was in attendance for and witnessed first hand the impact Vick had on the community. “The places were always packed, many of whom were people whose lives were touched by that experience,” Bowen said. “To them, he was an extremely powerful symbol of hope and redemption. That really struck me.” Bowen explained that the speeches were just as much about Vick encouraging those in attendance to pull themselves away from these situations and bad influences, as much as it was about dogfighting. Vick said in his book, “I made a vow to myself: I was going to try and do the right things in my life moving forward; I was going to be conscious of the people I let into my life, even if it was

family.” He would make an effort of getting that point across to those that were in attendance for his speeches.

Vick’s involvement with the Humane Society didn’t end with speaking engagements. In July 2011, he accompanied Pacelle to Capitol Hill in an effort to draw attention to some of the inadequate animal welfare laws. Vick knew the importance of his role with the Humane Society and said the right things in regards to his new role. “If I had the chance to take back one thing that I have done in my life, it would be what happened to those dogs,” Vick said. “The only thing I can do now is try to make it right by seeking to help more animals than I have hurt by doing things like speaking to groups through the Humane Society about the evils of dog-fighting.” In Washington, in front of Congress, Vick and Pacelle gave their support for legislation that would make it a misdemeanor for anyone attending a dogfight or a cockfight. Also, they gave their support for legislation that would make it a felony to take a child to a dogfight or a cockfight.

Pacelle and others knew the type of effect Vick could have when speaking to at-risk youth about these issues. Tony Dungy, one of Vick’s closest advisors throughout his rehabilitation process, marveled at the profound impact Vick has on this generation of young men in Vick’s book, *Finally Free*.

“As much as I would like to talk to kids about staying in school and doing the right things, there is going to be a certain group of kids I could never reach,” Dungy revealed. “They’re going to look at me as an old ex-coach who doesn’t really know what they’re dealing with. But when Mike Vick talks to them, they know he has walked the same streets and he’s been where they are. He’s going to impact a generation that I know I never could.”

Vick credits two powerful speaking engagements that have been instrumental in his process of rehabilitation and re-branding. The first one was when he returned to prison, to speak

to inmates with Tony Dungy. Peter King, long-time *Sports Illustrated* reporter, covered it for the magazine. Vick, admittedly, was nervous about being back in prison, but once he decided to speak from the heart and be candid about his experiences, it turned out to be a success for him. He hopes to do it more in the future.

The other event that Vick says he holds dear to him is when he was chosen by the students from Camelot schools - an alternative high school program in Philadelphia that serves at-risk youth - to be their commencement speaker. It was an honor for Vick, who also announced during that speech that he would be funding two \$5,000 college scholarships for students of the program. Another step in a long road of rehabilitation.

Vick's team has made a concerted effort to control the message that Vick is sending to the masses. For one, Vick has an impressive following on social media, through Facebook, Twitter, and his personal website. The Official Facebook Page of Michael Vick has more than 2 million "Likes," the most of any NFL player, and his official Twitter page (@MikeVick) has over 1.76 million followers, which ranks him 4th in terms of NFL players (Chad Ochocinco, Reggie Bush, and Tim Tebow currently have more followers), according to fanpagelist.com. He uses these forums primarily as a space to plug products he's endorsing (he has "MusclePharm Athlete" in his twitter bio, for example); or to interact with fans, mostly to discuss sports or to retweet fans in their Vick jerseys. He recently came out with a new app called "Mike Vick: Game Time" which has received rave reviews in the iTunes App Store. He uses his Twitter page as a forum to discuss the game with fans, as well as promoting it. There is plenty of fan interaction on Vick's Twitter page and he does an excellent job of making himself available to his fans.

Upon Vick's release from prison, Black Entertainment Television (BET) produced a documentary series, entitled "The Michael Vick Project," a 10-part series that premiered on the

network on January 26, 2010. The documentary chronicled Vick on his road to recovery, filming intimate moments of him in his personal life, including when he proposed to his girlfriend, as well as when he returned to Bad Newz Kennels, the site of his massive dogfighting ring.

Vick runs two websites, his personal one (MikeVick.com), and one for his V7 clothing line (V7TeamVick.com). V7 Team Apparel is Vick's official apparel line and can be found exclusively at Modell's Sporting Goods. His personal website does an excellent job of being your one-stop shop for everything Vick-related. The site is complete with a bio tab, media clips, links to all the various social media that Vick participates in, as well as links to buy his book, *Finally Free*. Most importantly, there are multiple links to his charity, the Team Vick Foundation (TeamVickFoundation.org).

The Team Vick Foundation has various programs which can be found on Facebook (/TeamVickFoundation) and Twitter (@TeamVickOrg) as well as their website, aimed at giving people a second chance, an idea that Vick says is near and dear to his heart. Their slogan, "Digging deep to help those in need of a second chance," is carried out through their variety of activities. They have an entire array of outreach programs and activities aimed at enhancing, particularly children in at-risk communities, through child development programs, academic enrichment programs, sports and wellness programs, as well as family support and intervention programs. You can also find press releases of things Vick is doing throughout the community. The foundation, based in Virginia, works closely with the local Boys & Girls Clubs, an organization important to Vick, as he spent plenty of time there growing up in Virginia and where he works directly with Mr. James "Poo" Johnson, a key mentor early in Vick's life, and manager of the Boys & Girls Club in Vick's Newport News neighborhood.

A testament to Vick's rise in popularity, he finished second in a fan vote to determine the cover of EA Sports *Madden '12* video game. It would have made Vick the only two-time cover athlete. Around that same time, Kage Games was prepping a release for their *Dog Wars* game which was to be featured on Android smart-phones. It was a game that glorified dogfighting, and Vick, alongside the Humane Society, was out in front in opposition of the game and what it represented. "I've come to learn the hard way that dogfighting is a dead-end street," Vick said, via the Humane Society website. "Now I am on the right side of the issue, and I think it's important to send the smart message to kids, and not glorify this form of animal cruelty, even in an Android app."

Comparisons can be drawn to other star athletes who went through recent scandals. One of these men is Kobe Bryant. In 2003, Bryant was a three-time NBA champion with the Los Angeles Lakers, perennial All-Star, and one of the most recognizable faces in the game. Rape accusations came out in 2003 from a woman in Colorado, rocking Bryant's personal life as well as his career. During the 2003-04 Lakers' season, Bryant would routinely play games then immediately fly to Colorado to be in court. The scandal was a strain on his marriage, his team suffered from his issues with teammates, and his image took a major hit.

Prior to the allegations, Bryant had endorsement deals with McDonald's, Coca-Cola, Nutella, Russell Corp, and Nintendo. In his early years, he wore Adidas, but once his contract ran out he signed a deal with Nike just months prior to the allegations coming out. His deal with Nike was reportedly for five years and was in the \$40-45 million range. Nike stayed when all the other companies left (similar to Vick before eventually having no choice but to drop him), instead opting to not use his image on any marketing materials and not release his signature shoe until almost two years after the case was eventually dismissed.

Bryant has done a tremendous job of not only restoring his image, but perhaps being even more popular than before. Amid the allegations, he appeared at a news conference with his wife and admitted to adultery but denied rape. The case would eventually be dismissed during the jury selection process, when the accuser decided not to testify after information was discovered that brought her character, among other things, into question. Since the Colorado scandal, Bryant has released eight signature Nike shoes. He has resurrected his relationship with Coca-Cola, appeared on the cover of numerous video games, and signed endorsement deals with Turkish Airlines and other companies. In 2010, on the heels of a second straight NBA championship, his fifth overall, *Forbes* ranked Bryant #14 on the Celebrity 100 List, sandwiched between Miley Cyrus and Jay-Z. He was the third highest ranked athlete on the list, trailing only Tiger Woods and Michael Jordan - who themselves would have reputation management issues. In 2010, he had the highest-selling NBA jersey in the United States, China, and Europe.

The biggest decisions Vick made in his life, post-incarceration, were the essential decisions that he had to make. For one, the decision to eliminate those who caused trouble in his life and were a negative influence on him once he made it to the NFL. You have to cut ties with those who bring you down and jeopardize your brand, regardless of how close you were with them in the past. Secondly, the re-emergence of leaders in his life was crucial. Whether it be Tony Dungy's guidance, his rekindled relationship with his former high-school coach and "father figure" Tommy Reamon, college coach Frank Beamer and his staff, Atlanta Falcons owner Arthur Blank, and NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell. All of these men, at one point or another, Vick left behind, or betrayed their trust. It wasn't until he owned up to his mistakes and made amends with these men that he truly started to see some results. With these influences in

his life, combined with the support system the Eagles had in place for him, his family, his teammates, and his management, Vick made strides.

Vick comments on this in his book, and I think it's particularly true. He got very lucky to land in the situation he did in Philadelphia, for a multitude of reasons. From a development perspective, Vick admits that he was not in football shape physically and mentally, and it would have been extremely difficult for him had he gone to Buffalo, for example, and immediately taken over as the starter. Being in Philadelphia, behind Donovan McNabb on the depth chart, with no expectations, allowed him to get his legs back under him and slowly become re-acquainted with the NFL. He compared it to his red-shirt season at Virginia Tech, which prepared him for future success in college. Eagles beat reporter and *Philadelphia Magazine* journalist Tim McManus weighed in on the situation. "A lot of it is tied to playing time and being successful in that time." McManus added, "if Vick ended up in a smaller market and doesn't play, the attention doesn't go on him, the opinions stay where they are. He doesn't get the opportunity to turn things around." He's absolutely right.

The fans in Philadelphia also played an important role. Philadelphia fans are hard, but they're fair. They are stereotyped in the national media as brutal, when the fact of the matter is that they are passionate. As someone who has been a season ticket holder all my life and a former employee of the organization, I know the fans feed on heart and effort. Vick possesses both of these qualities on the field and the fans recognize it. "In the Philadelphia community, they see a guy who has really dedicated himself to changing the perception out there and to do the right thing," McManus said. However, he's just like any other athlete that dons a uniform in this town. If you don't perform to your abilities, the town will voice its displeasure. It's nothing personal, they just demand a little more than certain football towns. "More than some places,

people here are willing to put winning over other values,” Bowen said. He added that, “the fact that he was able to make these appearances in Philadelphia and the support from the large African-American community helped a great deal. I think it would have been a very different perception had he been in Green Bay.” There’s no doubt Philadelphia and its fan-base helped, at least initially, in Vick’s resurgence.

Vick recalled his first appearance in an Eagles uniform, during a pre-season game against Jacksonville he heard a raucous applause when he entered the game and chants of “We Want Vick!” as he left. Sure there were those who protested and those would not support the team. There was even a sandwich shop owner that claimed that he would never serve Vick if he ever came into his restaurant, but those obstacles would face Vick anywhere. Philadelphia is a place that loves a story of redemption and most importantly, loves an athlete who leaves it all on the field, which no one can dispute that Vick does on a daily basis.

All of these issues now contribute to Vick’s uncertain future. There’s a new coach in Philadelphia in Chip Kelly, while his long-time supporter Andy Reid is now in Kansas City. With another poor season, Vick could easily see himself cut at season’s end, and then it gets particularly cloudy. What team will take a chance on a then 34-year old quarterback with the kind of baggage Vick has? It’s a question that a dynamic 2013 season from Vick could eliminate from ever having to be answered.

All of the members of the Philadelphia sports media I interviewed shared my sentiments that on-the-field success was the most important factor in Vick’s rise in popularity, followed by his partnership with the Humane Society. They all also brought up this idea of sincerity with Vick, and that not everyone who has taken to him believes that he is sincere. It’s an issue that they say he will forever face, and that there’s uncertainty about how sincere he truly is. “We

were all interested in finding out if he was sincere. I still am not sure, it's hard to know," Bowen said. Sure, Vick has lots of people telling him what to say and do, but every indication is that Vick recognizes that he did a horrible thing and conveys honesty to those he speaks to. "I haven't been able to see anything to suggest that it's fake and the rest of the reporters feel the same way and that has spilled out into the community," McManus said. I agree. Vick has been through a lot since 2007 because of poor decisions he made, and he's doing everything he can to ensure that he doesn't make those same mistakes again.

It hasn't necessarily been smooth sailing for Vick since that 2010 season both on and off the field, most of which is related to his on-field performance. In the last two NFL seasons Vick has performed poorly at times and even been benched, which have led the fans to cry out for change at the quarterback position. "The last two years he's been hurt a lot and he hasn't looked good and you see this backlash against him," Bowen said. Due to his style of play, he's often injured or hobbled, leading to poor decision making and not being able to perform on the field at the level he's accustomed to.

Off the field hasn't been perfect either. In 2012, Vick was once again voted the most hated athlete in sports, according to a *Forbes* poll (he finished in a tie with Tiger Woods who at the time was in the middle of a domestic issue and a messy divorce). In 2013, Vick had to cancel a book tour because he received what his publisher said were "credible threats" on his life. It's been far from perfect these last two years, but Vick is listening to his management team and sticking to the things that helped him so much a few years ago.

Vick's image rebuilding is still a work in progress. Now four full NFL seasons removed from incarceration, Vick has made tremendous strides with his brand. "Vick and his team have done a tremendous job of re-branding his image," Kapadia said. "I don't see how anyone can

view the work of Vick's PR team as anything but a success." I reached out to representatives from the PR firm French, West & Vaughn, a North Carolina based firm that represents Vick for comment, but they never responded to multiple e-mail requests.

As has been discussed throughout, the notion of winning trumps everything else he can do in regards to re-building his brand. The winning is most important. Off the field, staying out of any further trouble is necessary. In terms of his outreach partnerships, I agree with Les Bowen that his partnership with the Humane Society is by far the most important PR move he's made post-incarceration. His openness to discuss his past and his future were imperative as well, which is why writing his book was a good decision. It gave the rest of us insight into a troubled person on the road to redemption, a road that is far from finished.

He'll never be the most beloved athlete in the world and there is still a large segment of people in America who will not only never forgive him for what he did but will never think he deserved a second chance to play in the NFL. "Not everyone will be won over, ever," McManus added. "But, by and large, he's done a good job of changing his perception here."

There will always be people that won't support whatever team he is on, because of his presence on the roster. No amount of work with the Humane Society can change that. However, Vick is certainly headed in the right direction in his image re-branding, no doubt about that.