

Risking the Most Important Things – *Fr. Dean McFalls*

Strange things have been happening in the world of American pro sports.

I'm not referring so much to the Texas Ranger's 30-3 clobbering of the Baltimore Orioles, and with it of the American League record for points in a single game. And I'm not returning to the Barry Bonds controversy.

What's troubling me now is how an athlete who has everything the world can offer would put it all at risk, not for performance enhancing substances, not even for outrageous behaviors, but for a dog-fighting ring.

Michael Vick signed a lucrative contract in 2004, landing him a \$37 million dollar bonus, and totaling \$167 million. In 2006, his \$1.4 million dollar salary plus \$7 million bonus brought him a total of \$8, 401,980.00.

As one of the NFL's most highly-overrated players (according to several polls), Vick enjoyed endorsement contracts with Nike, EA Sports, Powerade, Kraft, Rawlings, Hasbro and AirTran. Combined with his contract, these commercial connections elevated him to number 33 in Forbes' Top 100 Celebrities in 2005. But well before the dog-fighting scandal broke, Vick was already losing his endorsements due to irresponsible behavior.

Still, the all-star quarterback had his nest-egg secure for years to come, given his 10-season Falcons contract. It is incomprehensible that for something as brutal and offensive as dog-fighting (not to mention the testimonies by Vick's co-defendants that he participated in the barbaric execution of dogs which under-performed), such a talented and respected professional athlete would be willing to sacrifice everything, including the well-being and future of his children. But above and beyond the loss of international reputation, the most lucrative NFL contract in history (at least until 2005), and possibly the ability to compete again in pro football, Vick has also undermined his own ability to inspire a new generation of athletes. No sane kid who loves football will be able to ignore the cruelty that Vick has shown to animals, without any sign of authentic remorse.

Michael Vick will undoubtedly go down in history as one of America's more infamous – and tragic – modern stories. As we watch in disbelief at his vacillating between pleas of “guilty” or “not-guilty”, let's take the opportunity to ask ourselves some hard questions: *What am I willing to put at risk for the sake of lesser things? What have I already sacrificed?* For Christians, the question is even more urgent: *Guaranteed eternal salvation in Christ, have I risked losing heaven for something on earth?*