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201 Legislative Office Building  
18 Capitol Square  
Atlanta, Georgia 30334

404.656.0028 or outside the Atlanta area 800.282.5803

### OPINION

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For Information Contact:  
Merri M. Brantley, Director  
[merri.brantley@senate.ga.gov](mailto:merri.brantley@senate.ga.gov)  
404.463.6833/770.361.4364

# Dog fighting is a crime, not a sport

By: Sen. Eric Johnson  
Senate President Pro Tempore



In recent weeks, much has been reported about Falcons quarterback Michael Vick's alleged involvement in dog fighting. Each year, thousands of people attend these horrific "sporting" events, which pit two aggressive dogs against each other until one of them is dead or nearly dead. If Michael Vick had been hosting dog fights at his million dollar estate in Georgia, our laws would send him to prison for a year with a fine of less than \$5,000. But our law doesn't address the industry behind the actual fight. It needs to.

Dog fighting is not a sport – it is animal abuse and it is time we bring it to a halt in this state. For several years, various legislators have introduced legislation strengthening the laws in Georgia against dog fighting. The most recent attempt is Senate Bill 16, authored by Sen. Chip Rogers of Woodstock. His legislation, which passed the Senate overwhelmingly last session, now sits in the House Non-Civil Judiciary Committee awaiting a hearing and vote.

Dog fighting tends to occur in the shadows of society much like family violence. Dog fights are not promoted to the general public, and are held in dark, out of the way parts of the community – much like the old smoke-filled speakeasies during the days of prohibition. The Vick indictment has shined a spotlight on this barbaric behavior.

Psychologist Randall Lockwood, senior vice president for the Anti-Cruelty Initiatives and Legislative Services for the American Society of the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals says that violence against animals and people both are related to similar factors, including low self-esteem, social and anger management problems, insensitivity towards others and a desire for power and control. “Violence is violence is violence,” he said. Those who abuse animals often graduate to violence against humans.

The legislation that awaits passage probably will not end dog fighting, but it will help our law enforcement officials curb the practice. Senate Bill 16 will make it illegal for a person to own, breed, purchase or transport a dog for the purpose of fighting or baiting. It will fortify the present laws to increase prison time and fines for those who partake in dog fighting – as a breeder, a sponsor or a stakeholder. Spectators who are arrested will be charged with a felony and those who have participated in dog fighting may be prohibited from ever owning or possessing animals again.

The proposed law applies only to dog-on-dog fighting and does not prohibit hunting with dogs or dog competitions. It is not breed specific either. The law will go after the dog fighting industry, not legitimate dog-related activities.

Whether Vick is guilty or not, his alleged actions have brought much needed attention to an ugly and brutal practice. The House of Representatives must now address this epidemic and I encourage them to bring this bill to a vote. This time next year, we need to have a strong law in place so that anyone who engages in dog fighting will be severely punished.

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*Sen. Eric Johnson is the President Pro Tempore of the State Senate. He represents Senate District One, which includes Bryan County and a portion of Chatham and Liberty counties. He may be reached by e-mail at [eric.johnson@senate.ga.gov](mailto:eric.johnson@senate.ga.gov) or at 404.656.5109.*