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Flags down over Block award to Eagles' Vick

Animal advocates outraged over teammates' choice

By Jill Rosen

Baltimore Sun reporter

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For years Darlene Sanders Harris donated money to the Ed Block Courage Awards Foundation and looked forward to the annual ceremony in Baltimore where she could mingle with the NFL players who won the prestigious honor and hear their inspiring stories.

But as the Ed Block organization formally announces its winners today, the Glen Burnie animal advocate, along with at least a thousand others, will be protesting, appalled that the Philadelphia Eagles' Michael Vick, just released from prison for his role in a brutal dog-fighting operation, was chosen to be on the winners list.

Vick's Eagles teammates voted for him to get the award, named after a longtime Baltimore Colts trainer who also worked as a physical therapist at a hospital for disabled children. The Baltimore-based foundation seeks to honor players who are "role models" and "exemplify commitments to the principles of sportsmanship and courage."

"Even if I wasn't an animal advocate, this would very much offend me - if I was a fellow recipient, this would offend me," Harris said Monday. "It's a slap in the face to Ed Block. Michael Vick is not courage material."

At a news conference last week, the Eagles showed their support for Vick. Coach Andy Reid said he wasn't worried about how others might judge the award.

"Everybody is going to have their opinion on it, I'm sure," Reid said. "Until you've been with him for the hours that his teammates have been with him and seen him through all these different things that he's had to go through, that time-tested part of it, you can't appreciate it."

Eagles spokesman Derek Boyko said neither Vick nor anyone from the team was available for comment on Monday. Vick, who's been working with the Humane Society of the United States since his release in May from jail, speaking to young people about dogfighting, has said he's prevailed over much adversity lately.



At last week's news conference, Vick said, "I've overcome a lot, more than probably one single individual can handle or bear. You ask certain people to walk through my shoes, they probably couldn't do. Probably 95 percent of the people in this world because nobody had to endure what I've been through, situations I've been put in, situations I put myself in and decisions I have made, whether they have been good or bad."

However, Harris and others are making sure their disapproval is heard. She started an action group on Facebook, urging people to help her stop Vick's award. On Monday, the group topped 300 members.

A similar online petition at Change.org has attracted nearly 700 supporters.

Others are firing off letters to the charity, and People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals issued a statement criticizing the Eagles' choice of Vick.

"Michael Vick should not be someone anyone points to as a model of sportsmanship, even though he has now exchanged dogs for touchdowns after serving time for extreme cruelty to numerous animals," said PETA.

Anna Vitale Lybrook, treasurer of the Ed Block Award Foundation board, said board members called a meeting to discuss the situation Monday night. "We're as surprised as anyone else," she said. "We're kind of taken aback by it."

The organization has never before questioned any team's award selection, Lybrook said, adding that the group wants to definitively distance itself from what was the Eagles' own choice.

"We are innocent in all of this," she said.

Paul Mittermeier, the Ed Block organization's spokesman, acknowledged getting "a few" e-mails from protesters.

He also pointed out that an ESPN poll found that 51 percent of people "were OK with him getting the award."

"It's definitely something that's been debated over the last couple of days," Mittermeier said.

The Foundation's CEO, Sam Lamantia, to whom many of the protest letters are addressed, did not return calls Monday. Board members could not be reached late Monday.

Other players who have won the Block award include Joe Montana, Tiki Barber, Peyton Manning, Jerry Rice and Dan Marino.

This year the Baltimore Ravens selected safety Dawan Landry, who after suffering a serious neck injury and missing the last 14 games of the 2008 season, returned this year to regain his starting job.

The winners will be honored in March at a gala at Baltimore's Martin's West reception hall.

Earlier this year when the Humane Society asked Baltimore Mayor Sheila Dixon if it could bring Vick to town to speak at a school, Baltimore's new Anti-Animal Cruelty Task Force unanimously vetoed the idea. Task Force Chairwoman Caroline Griffin said Monday she planned to draft a letter to the Ed Block Foundation "expressing our grave disappointment and concerns."

Meanwhile board member Aileen Gabbey, executive director of the Maryland SPCA, said her organization is "shocked and appalled" Vick would be awarded for anything.

"I fail to see how he has done anything courageous. He did time. He's lucky to be employed. I don't see anything courageous about that," she said. "I'm particularly concerned about the message this award sends to kids: that a man who was convicted of severe cruelty gains not only a lucrative job but is specially honored, as well."

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