

Question dogs Cook: Can he be relied on?



- Coach Al Groh thought yes, and he gave the standout a second chance at the University of Virginia. Now, as a pro, Cook faces felony charges, making the stakes so much higher.

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They came to Al Groh with questions. These were NFL coaches and scouts and personnel directors. And they were doing what they do with every draft prospect — an informal background check, research into a young man's temperament.

The questions about Chris Cook, a standout cornerback Groh coached

at the University of Virginia, were predictably pointed.

Yes, Cook had an impressive 6-2, 210-pound frame with the coverage quickness of a little guy.

But did he have glaring character flaws?

Could he be relied on?

Why, after a season banished from the university and spent working in a Sears warehouse, was he afforded a second chance, an invitation by Groh

to grab the steering wheel of his life and point it in the right direction?

Groh had wrestled hard with that decision.

Heck, he was the one who had helped identify Cook's classroom carelessness as intolerable. He was the one who rubber-stamped Cook's suspension from the Gator Bowl in December 2007 then later amplified the punishment, dismissing the standout cornerback altogether before the fall semester of 2008.

So why, when an opportunity to slam the door on Chris Cook for good arrived, did Groh push it back open, stick his neck out and whistle for Cook to return?

"Look," Groh says now. "Given certain circumstances, it's easy for a coach to make himself look good by

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Reliability question dogs Cook

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throwing a kid under the bus. Sometimes the hard thing to do but the right thing to do is to stick with him and provide guidance."

Groh's guidance came in 2009 with Cook returning to the Cavaliers, so thankful for his second chance he changed his jersey number from 26 to 2.

That was a daily reminder to stay appreciative.

Cook changed his habits. He sharpened his focus. He bonded with Groh.

His breakout senior season was followed by an eye-catching Senior Bowl performance.

That eventually led the Vikings to draft him with their top pick in 2010.

But now the organization that provided Cook that golden opportunity faces its own complicated decision, with stakes much higher than Groh ever faced.

Cook faces felony domestic assault charges.

So what's next?

Another tough call

The Vikings' indecision — leaving Cook on their payroll while exiling him from the team — registers as uncertain.

The organization's stance: Cook certainly should not be playing football as he fights through such serious personal troubles.

On Oct. 22, he was arrested by Eden Prairie police after an argument with his girlfriend allegedly turned violent.

If convicted, Cook could face an extended prison stay.

So for the past 22 days, Vikings coach Leslie Frazier has wrestled with the options.

Over and over, Frazier has shown obvious discomfort when asked about the allegations. Last week, after discussing Cook's peculiar paid-leave status, Frazier was asked the best-case scenario for his troubled cornerback.

"You hope for the best," Frazier said. "Whatever that is, you hope for the best. The best-case scenario: Hopefully the allegations aren't true. Hopefully he gets things turned around."

Yet while hoping for the best, it's impossible to ignore the worst. The allegations summarized in a three-page Hennepin County criminal

complaint portray a disturbing act of aggression in which Cook threw his girlfriend down on a bed, bloodied her nose, struck her in the ear and choked her twice.

"Officers observed marks on Victim A's neck and hemorrhaging in Victim A's eye that is consistent with strangulation," the report reads.

This isn't missing class or failing an exam. These are felony charges.

This is another line on Cook's rap sheet, right below his arrest from March, that one in Virginia after a neighbor accused him of pulling a gun during an argument. Those charges later were dropped.

So why would Chris Cook deserve another chance?

A difficult decision

Even Anthony Poindexter, the Virginia safeties coach who recruited Cook to Charlottesville and became one of his mentors, knows Cook has put the Vikings in a precarious position.

"At heart, I know Chris is a great kid," Poindexter said. "But this goes beyond the question of whether to give a kid a second chance. More so than ever, the question will be asked, 'Do we want a kid like this to represent our organization and our league?'"

"This isn't college anymore. When you get to the NFL, it's a bottom-line business. And for the most part, coaches have far more to worry about than checking in on your well-being every night."

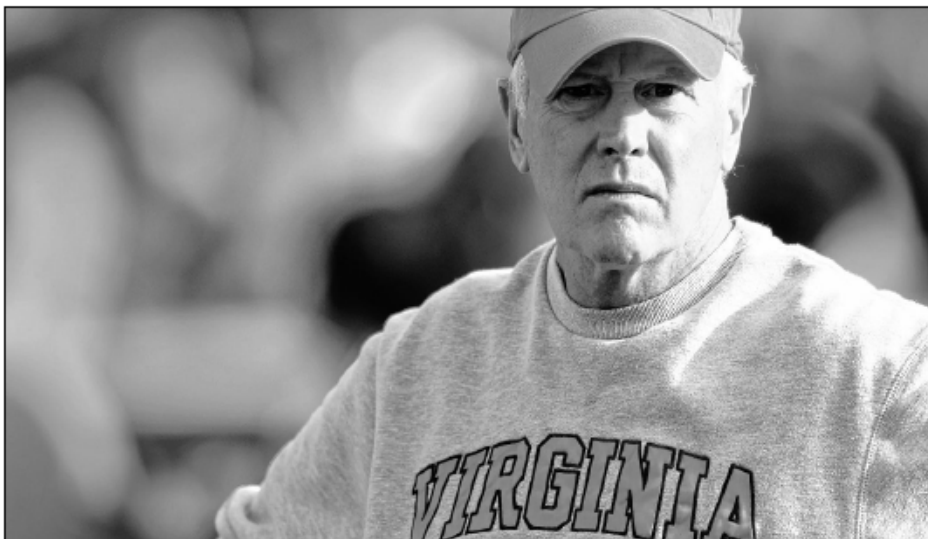
So how does an NFL head coach begin to evaluate a situation like Cook's?

"You look at his history with you and with the team," Frazier said Friday. "What they contribute to the team. And more importantly, what exactly went on. How much do you know about what went on? You try to evaluate every situation on an individual basis."

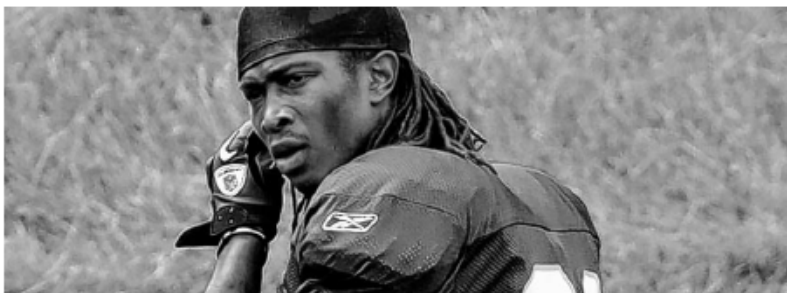
For Cook, the checklist of questions has resurfaced.

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Anthony Poindexter, the University of Virginia safeties coach who recruited Chris Cook



RICHARD SHIRO • Associated Press (above); Star Tribune file (below)



Former Virginia coach Al Groh had his struggles with Chris Cook — he dismissed him from the team before the 2008 season — but he was steadfast in his support when Cook changed his destructive behavior and rejoined the team in 2009.

Does he have glaring character flaws? Can he be relied on?

Thirty months ago when the NFL folks probed Groh for answers, he never wavered with his endorsement.

Grades were Cook's issue, Groh asserted. Not a lack of intelligence. And there were few, if any, behavioral problems to speak of.

"I told them all the same thing," Groh said. "If I was a coach of an NFL team again, or a coach of any team with an opportunity to get Chris Cook, I'd love to have him on my team again."

'I believe in the guy'

If Groh was Cook's sole supporter, it would be easier to dismiss his backing as hollow, to typecast Cook as a hopeless criminal with little appreciation for the chances he's been given.

But Chris Jones also coached Cook. For four years at Heritage High School in Lynchburg, Va., Jones watched Cook grow up. He identified Cook, as

so many have, as a reserved kid hesitant to trust others before he's had a chance to truly feel them out.

Cook hailed from a single-parent home and had solid support from his mother and grandfather. He also had a rough exterior, a byproduct of the neighborhood in which he grew up.

Said Jones: "Chris could come off as a tough guy and be misread by people who looked at the cornrows in his hair and the look on his face. But there were a lot of teachers who, once they got to know him, would tell me they realized he was a good person with a big heart."

Jones acknowledges the charges levied against Cook are disturbing. But he also can't help but root for Cook. He keeps thinking back to the times Cook visited his house and played video games with his kids.

"I never would have had Chris around my family if I didn't totally trust in him," Jones said. "That's the biggest

compliment I can pay. In no way will I condone what he's accused of. But I believe in the guy."

The waiting game

Poindexter saw Cook's renewed drive after football was taken away in 2008.

"He was in the work force without a degree," Poindexter said. "I think it hit home. He realized, 'Hey, God blessed me with a special talent. And I may have thrown it away.'"

But now what's next?

Cook hasn't spoken with reporters since his arrest. His next court date is Nov. 22. On Friday, he delivered a reflective message on Twitter: "ADVERSITY INTRODUCES A MAN TO HIMSELF!"

That second chance Groh extended? He's certain he made the right move.

"I always felt like Chris' heart was in the right place, that he would respond to people who showed confidence and trust in him," Groh said. "It has to be an instinctive thing. Do you

really think the player simply made a mistake but in the big picture he gets it? Maybe he just needs some more mentoring or some more sternness in his life. If a kid really didn't care, you have to pull the plug. We chose to take a different direction with Chris because we felt he showed great sincerity in his desire to do well for himself and the team."

Monday, after careful deliberation between Frazier and upper management, the Vikings pushed the wait-and-see button on Cook, willing to let the legal process play out.

There have been no outward votes of confidence expressed. But the Vikings haven't dismissed Cook yet, either.

"Knowing Chris, I know he understands the severity of what he's done and the ramifications that it's going to have on his life," Poindexter said. "Here again, he's at another crossroads with his career on the line. Will he get another chance? If he does, he better know that's it."

"The kid has a tremendous amount of talent. It would be a shame if he let his personal problems get in the way of the goals he set out to reach."

Now a 24-year-old waits, accused of a disturbing crime, his hands no longer on the steering wheel. His future now sits in so many others' hands.