

Chris Cook's high-profile trial ended in an acquittal, and the Vikings accepted him back. Now he vows to improve public perception and stand out on the playing field.



Cook was released from Hennepin County jail on Oct. 25 last year. He spent three days in jail following his arrest.

THE FALL AND RISE



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Chris Cook missed 10 Vikings games last season following his arrest on domestic assault charges. Acquitted, he is starting at cornerback this season.

By **DAN WIEDERER** • dan.wiederer@startribune.com

The questions have come repeatedly the past five months, with Chris Cook asked to consider whether he's truly different since the last time he played a regular-season game for the Vikings. ¶ *Have you changed?* ¶ *How have you changed?* ¶ *How much have you changed?* ¶ Cook prefers to shrug past such probing. So he will quickly assert he is the same guy he has always been. Still driven, still humble, still outgoing yet reserved with how much he opens the door to his private life.

Yes, there are obvious superficial changes. Those long dreadlocks that used to swim out of Cook's helmet when he played were chopped away long ago.

He has also changed jersey numbers, from 31 to 20 — a new number for a new beginning.

"I didn't really like 31 anyway," he'll say with a chuckle.

But what about the deeper change, the quest for greater maturity and perspective? Cook will admit he's been through an intense self-examination since last fall, his life shaken by a night of domestic violence, an arrest, a felony trial and a not guilty verdict that will forever be attached to his story.

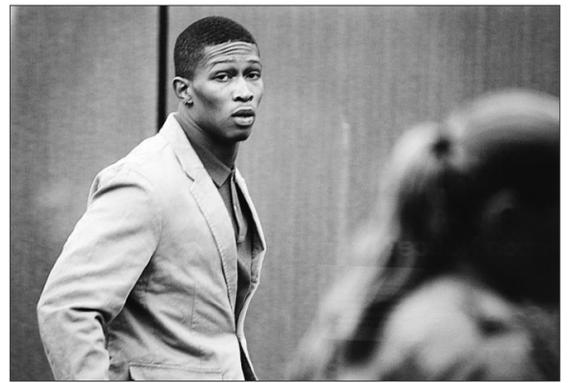
"With all I've been through, man, I know my attitude has to be different going forward," Cook said. "I have to have a more positive outlook. I think about my actions before I actually act on them. And I appreciate what I have now way more than I did before. I can't take this for granted."

A March 15 acquittal has put Cook's future back in his hands. A week from now, he will start at cornerback against Jacksonville,

Cook continues on C6 ►

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Chris Cook was steadfast in his claim of innocence after he was charged with felony assault (left), jailed, released and faced trial. He also showed humility when he was found not guilty on March 15 (right). Star Tribune file photos

COOK CASE AT A GLANCE

Key dates in Chris Cook's arrest, suspension and trial:

Oct. 22, 2011: Authorities are called to the Eden Prairie town house of Chris Cook shortly after 1:40 a.m. The Vikings defensive back is arrested after his girlfriend says he tried to choke her, twice, because she had texted an ex-boyfriend on her cellphone.

Oct. 25, 2011: Cook is charged with felony domestic assault, then released from jail after posting bail of \$40,000. The Vikings suspend Cook.

Nov. 6, 2011: The Vikings decide to pay Cook and keep him on their 53-player roster but tell him he

can't participate in football activities. His base salary is \$405,000 per season.

Nov. 22, 2011: Cook's attorneys say he will claim self-defense when the case goes to trial.

Jan. 3, 2012: Vikings coach Leslie Frazier says he is preparing for the

2012 season as if Cook will not be on the team.

March 5, 2012: Cook's trial begins with jury selection.

March 15, 2012: Cook is found not guilty of four charges, including two felony charges of domestic assault

by strangulation and domestic assault in the third degree. The Vikings say Cook can rejoin the team.

May 3, 2012: NFL confirms Cook faces no discipline relating to his arrest.

STAFF REPORTS

REPAIRING AN IMAGE

◀ COOK FROM C1

his NFL career resuscitated. What will take longer to repair are the impressions so many outsiders formed following Cook's arrest.

"It upset me how I was portrayed," Cook said. "Too many people [were] being judgmental and thinking they really knew what went on."

Tempers flare

On Oct. 21, Cook's girlfriend of 10 months, Chantel Baker, flew to Minnesota for a weekend the promising young cornerback hoped they would never forget.

The Vikings had a rivalry game that Sunday against Green Bay. More significant, Cook had plans to propose.

Instead, following a tense night out and a jealousy-fueled argument that turned vicious inside Cook's Eden Prairie town home, the weekend ended with the Vikings cornerback locked up in the Hennepin County Jail and the 21-year-old Baker back in Virginia, her face badly swollen, her neck marked up, her left eardrum ruptured.

Just like that, Cook faced felony domestic assault charges.

His relationship with Baker was effectively over. His football future seemed iffy at best.

"All that uncertainty, man, it will make you go crazy," he said.

For the final 10 games of 2011, the Vikings banished Cook from their activities, an exile he said created a void in his daily existence. Without the game, without the team, he felt a lack of purpose.

He doubted whether he would ever play again. And when that uncertainty peaked, he began considering plans to return to college, to finish his last semester and earn his anthropology degree.

Then in March, when Cook's trial began, he felt the sharp anxiety of a defendant whose fate hinged on the perspective of 12 strangers in a jury box.

"Those 10 weeks that I couldn't play were pretty hard," Cook said. "But those 10 days [in court] were way more intense."

The prosecution came armed with evidence aimed to prove Cook had pummeled Baker with excessive force. At the very least, the case against Cook shed light on his questionable decision-making.

In vivid detail, the night that changed everything was revisited.

After dinner that Friday at Rosa Mexicano, Baker's irritation spiked during a stop at Downtown Cabaret when Cook, she said, disappeared for too long with a stripper.

As Baker told police: "I figure you shouldn't get a 30-minute lap dance when your girlfriend's there with you."

The tension increased when Cook later found Baker upset and alone in the limousine he had rented. He seized her cellphone and discovered she had been texting and sending pictures to an ex-boyfriend named Bradley.



Chris Cook, who has switched to No. 20, broke up a pass during the second day of Vikings training camp at Mankato this summer.

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When the night ended at Cook's town home, eventually the hostility turned noisy and physical, excessively so, prompting an alarmed neighbor to call police.

Stories change

At times, the trial evidence seemed damning.

Baker had offered sworn statements to police and medical personnel insisting Cook had twice choked her with one hand while they fought, the second time cutting off her breathing.

Jurors were shown photographs of Baker taken shortly after the scuffle. The left side of her face appeared puffy and discolored. Her nose was bloodied. She had marks on her neck and spotting inside one eye.

The prosecution felt strongly about its case, even with Baker recanting her original story and testifying under oath that she had been the instigator, hurling a shoe and a lamp at Cook.

On the witness stand, she contended as well that she had lied about being choked.

Cook's lawyers had a neatly packaged self-defense argument. Only two people really knew what went on that night, they said — Cook and Baker. And at trial, they shared a similar story.

But there were also the phone calls Cook made from jail — three to Baker the day after their fight and another two days later to his roommate, Will Grishaw.

From the phone exchanges between Cook and Baker, prosecuting attorneys wanted jurors to consider Cook's seeming lack of contrition. His concern for Baker's physical well-being seemed trumped by suspicions she had been cheating on him.

ON HIS ARREST

« TOO MANY PEOPLE WERE BEING JUDGMENTAL AND THINKING THEY REALLY KNOW WHAT WAS GOING ON. »

ON HIS TEMPER

« SOMETIMES I GET MAD AND I JUST LET IT TAKE OVER ME. NOW ... I CAN CONTROL IT. »

At one point, Baker said she was sorry Cook wound up in jail.

"No you're not," he responded.

Moments later, Baker tried to persuade Cook to apologize.

"Do you know what you've done to me? Did you know that you bursted my eardrum, so obviously I can't hear out of my left ear. I have a concussion ... And I have a bruise on my nose and a bruise on my cheek."

Cook's next words: "Why are you texting Bradley?"

That left the prosecution uneasy. So too did Baker's recantation. Was it a truthful correction of what had happened? Or were there other influences?

The prosecution raised an eyebrow at the call Cook made to Grishaw from jail suggesting his legal situation could improve dramatically if Baker would contact his attorney, David Valentini, and alter the story she'd given police.

Cook: *She need to call Dave and talk to him about that strangulation [charge] for real. That needs to come up off of there.*

Grishaw: *Do you want me to call her?*

Cook: *I ain't even supposed to be communicating with her so ...*

Grishaw: *Oh, true.*

Cook: *You know what I'm saying.*

Grishaw: *I know what it is.*

Cook: *You know what it is. Me and you on the same page.*

Yet the raw emotion in Cook's calls with Baker seemed to shine a light on the couple's deep affection. Even after such a ferocious argument, Baker continued professing her love for Cook during each conversation. Then, before departing Minnesota, she left behind a letter.

"I'm sorry this happened to us and especially to you," the note read. "My bumps and bruises will heal but your career is on the line all because of me. If I wouldn't have come, none of this would have happened and I'm truly sorry. I love you to death and it hurts me to know you're in jail and I'm the reason why."

Swift acquittal

By the end of trial, the jury could not find evidence beyond a reasonable doubt to convict Cook on any of four charges: domestic assault by strangulation; domestic assault in the third degree; assault with intent to cause fear; or assault inflicting bodily harm.

Just like that, a page turned and a relieved 25-year-old took

hold of an opportunity to prove that one night's chaos will not define who he is and what he can become.

On the afternoon Cook got his future back, he left the Hennepin County Government Center with a smile but not before stopping to purchase a few boxes of Girl Scout cookies. It was an odd yet simple moment, Cook craving some celebratory Thin Mints but also noting that he wanted to make a concerted effort to help.

What Cook has now is an eagerness to show the outside world what those who know him best often see — that he is not a monster but an energetic, often introspective young man with a want to please those who show confidence in him.

Ask teammate and friend Jamarca Sanford about Cook and he will note his admiration for Cook's big heart. "He's a caring person, a good guy."

Similar sentiments are shared by those whose relationships with Cook trace much further back. This summer, Leverage Marshall, the principal at Bass Elementary School in Lynchburg, Va., asked Cook to return to his old school to speak to students.

Cook gave similar talks at Heritage Elementary and Payne Elementary in Lynchburg. He also donated gifts to the game room at the Fairview Heights Neighborhood Center and presided over an Olympic Day there.

"Chris has an understanding that when you make mistakes, you have to dust yourself up and push yourself forward," Marshall said. "I think he recognizes the struggles within his story can help kids understand how to overcome the difficulty and trouble in their lives. He's a good young man."

A team's trust

The Vikings' decision to welcome back Cook was a no-brainer. He is a dynamic defensive back on a team in desperate need of one. But the depth of the Winter Park discussions should not go unmentioned.

The Vikings coaches and front office wanted to sift through Cook's case for more than just its verdict. They examined the decisions that led to his arrest and the potential complications of a reunion, especially with General Manager Rick Spielman and coach Leslie Frazier vowing to build around players whose character matches their talent.

The Vikings' much publicized arrest record — 39 of them since 2000 — and a quest to clean things up added to the debate.

"With Chris' situation, there was a lot of complexity in weighing together the legal side of it, the football side of it, the ownership side of it," Spielman said. "We had a lot of questions. And there were a lot of things discussed that we'll keep internally. But it was thoroughly discussed."

The Vikings considered how Cook had handled himself during his first year and a half with the franchise and didn't worry much about his March 2011 arrest in Virginia on charges that he brandished a gun during an argument with a neighbor. That also resulted in an acquittal.

They classified Cook as an ambitious player who connected with teammates and made extra efforts to be involved in the community. They said they were convinced what happened that October night was out of character.

"You try to look at the whole picture of the kid," Spielman said. "We believe in Chris as a person. And he's the type of person we want to be here."

Added Frazier: "Chris was really shaken by this whole ordeal to the point where I think, long term, it's going to be beneficial for him and very beneficial to us. Because now he's extremely focused on trying to do things right. ... This got his attention. As hard as it was that period of time, I told Chris if he handles it the right way, it can be a turning point in his life."

So now Cook has his chance to prove whether the Vikings are right about him. And that, Cook says, he won't take for granted.

Even before his case went to trial, he voluntarily enrolled in anger management classes.

"Sometimes I get mad and I just let it take over me," he said. "Now, I can feel my anger coming on and I can control it better and calm myself down."

This week, with the regular season beginning, Cook gets that long-awaited chance to play on the biggest stage again.

It is, he believes, his opening to move forward.

Of all the changes Cook has undergone and is pursuing, a change to the way his story is told ranks near the top of his list.