

Teach the 'Good Kids'
With Real Consequences for Bad Behavior

By John Feinstein
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The easiest thing in the world this week is to pile on Marcus Vick, the disgraced Virginia Tech quarterback who was thrown off the team after a series of embarrassing incidents on and off the field.

Even after Virginia Tech President Charles Steger announced last week that Vick was no longer welcome on the team after his eighth and ninth traffic violations since he enrolled and since he stomped on the leg of a Louisville player during the Gator Bowl game Jan. 2, Vick kept finding trouble. This past weekend, it was charges of brandishing a gun at three teenagers in a fast-food shop's parking lot.

So let's all pile on Vick. His response to being thrown off the team was to drop out of school and announce he'd follow his older brother, Michael, the Atlanta Falcons' Pro Bowl quarterback, to the National Football League. His comment on his dismissal from the team put him near the top of the list of athletes sounding arrogant beyond belief: "It's not a big deal. . . . I'll just move to the next level, baby."

And the truth is that if he can play, he'll be welcome at the next level. Professional sports teams don't care if you've been to jail, been stopped a hundred times for traffic violations, stomped on 10 opponents' legs or made profane gestures at opposing fans (which Vick did at least once this season). They care if you can play. Period.

All of which brings us to an issue that goes well beyond the troubles of Marcus Vick. His story reflects a much larger problem at all levels of sports: the existence of a place that we might call, for want of a better term, "The Land of Never Wrong."

This is where truly gifted athletes live. They are given second, third, fourth and 15th chances solely because of their talent. That's why so many of them come to believe that rules and laws, even rules of decent behavior, don't apply to them.

Certainly Virginia Tech deserves no credit for finally cutting the cord with Vick. In addition to his many driving infractions, Vick had twice faced criminal charges during his time at the school. That led to a suspension in 2004, but he was allowed to return in 2005, despite having shown little regret for his infractions. Why? Tech needed a new starting quarterback.

Indeed, until the school learned that he had been charged on Dec. 17 with speeding and driving on a revoked or suspended license, it was planning to suspend him for just two games for the Gator Bowl incident. Vick had claimed that the stomping was an accident, despite clear evidence to the contrary on videotape, repeated endlessly for national TV audiences. Then, the second he was off the football team, Vick dropped out of school. So

much for yet another "student-athlete." (He also claimed that he had apologized to Elvis Dumervil, the player he stomped on. Dumervil said he'd never heard from Vick.)

Throughout Vick's time at Virginia Tech, football coach Frank Beamer has maintained that he is "a good kid." They're always good kids when they can play. What Beamer should have done -- long ago -- and what other coaches with talented but troublesome players should do is stop making excuses for such "good kids." If Beamer had suspended Vick when he first began to get in trouble, and told him that next time he'd be gone, Vick might have gotten a different message.

But it's not fair to single out Virginia Tech -- what goes on there isn't unusual. Look at the University of Colorado, where Gary Barnett was kept on as head football coach even after his players were accused of sexually harassing women and hiring prostitutes during recruiting parties. It was only after his team lost its final three games this season, badly, that Barnett was fired. When a University of Virginia player was involved in an incident at Boston College this season that was just as ugly as Vick-Dumervil, it wasn't the school that suspended him for one game but the Atlantic Coast Conference. When Virginia coach Al Groh was asked if he felt badly that his player hadn't called the player he had injured (after the whistle), he was baffled the question was even asked.

The list goes on. And not just in football. Sixteen years ago, John McEnroe, the brilliant but hot-tempered tennis superstar, was thrown out of a match during the Australian Open after he directed a series of profanities at a chair umpire and his supervisor. McEnroe was 30 at the time. A couple of months later, reflecting on his punishment, he said: "If someone had done that to me when I was 18, I honestly think a lot of things would have been different. The message I got early on was that I could get away with just about anything on the court. No one wanted me defaulted. The tournament director didn't want me defaulted; neither did the TV people. But if someone had nailed me, cost me a big tournament, the chances are I would have learned my lesson and not done it again. I mean, I'm not stupid. Tell me where the line is and I won't cross it. The message I got until Australia was that there was no line."

That's the message most star athletes get. If Marcus Vick wished to remain in college, you can bet that even now there would be schools that would take him in a second. Until the people around star athletes stop telling them -- and us -- that they're "good kids," when they're actually behaving very badly, nothing is going to change in The Land of Never Wrong.

The writer is a contributor to The Post. His latest book is "Next Man Up: A Year Behind The Lines in Today's NFL."