

## **TERRY BAKER: A DIFFERENT SUCCESS**

By Beau Riffenburgh

Tucked away for many years in the basement of the Lake Oswego, Oregon, home of a successful attorney was the most renowned award in sports – the Heisman Trophy. That Heisman had been a symbol of Terry Baker's excellence in college football, but in some senses it also had mocked his brief and unsatisfying pro career.

Today winning the Heisman usually precedes a lucrative pro contract and a fast start in the NFL, such as in the cases of Billy Sims, George Rogers, Marcus Allen, and Herschel Walker.

But 25 years ago, some wondered if the Heisman were a jinx. Joe Bellino of Navy (the winner in 1960) and John Huarte of Notre Dame (1964) fizzled in pro attempts; Ernie Davis of Syracuse (1961) died before he could play his first NFL game; and Roger Staubach (1963) had to fulfill his four-year Naval commitment before he could join the Dallas Cowboys.

Even the most honored college football player of the era, Oregon State's Baker, suffered through a pro career as disappointing as his college years had been glorious.

Baker broke into the major-college football scene in a big way as a sophomore Single-Wing tailback in 1960. Starting the season on the bench, he took over when Don Kasso was injured, and went on to finish sixth in the nation in total offense, with 1,473 yards.

As a junior, Baker wasn't quite as effective while he adjusted to head coach Tommy Prothro's switch to the T-formation and his move to quarterback. However, he still accounted for 1,230 yards, one of the highest figures on the coast.

Baker owned college athletics in 1962. In football, he led the nation in total offense, with 2,276 yards, the second-most ever at the time and a record for T quarterbacks. He also led the nation in passing yards, touchdown passes, points accounted for, and, according to the modern way of figuring it, passer rating. He finished his career as the second most-productive player in NCAA history, trailing only Johnny Bright in total offense yards. He also won the Heisman and the Maxwell Trophies, was a unanimous football All-America and an academic All-America. Baker also led his basketball team to the final four of the NCAA tournament, was an academic All-America in basketball, and was a very successful right-handed baseball pitcher (although he was a left-handed quarterback).

Ultimately, Baker was drafted by teams in professional baseball and basketball as well as by the Los Angeles Rams, who made him the first pick of the NFL draft.

"A lot of people look back today and question the Rams' selection of Baker as the first pick," says one NFL personnel director. "But every single scouting department in the league had him rated as the top pick in the draft that year. He would have gone first no matter who had the first choice.

"The guy could do it all. He averaged five yards a carry, he was a high-percentage passer when not many were, he had quick feet, a fast release, perhaps the best mind in all of college football, and he was a hell of a leader. And any doubts anyone had about him were blown away on that one play in the bowl game."

That play was in Baker's last college game, when he set an unbreakable record by racing 99 yards for the longest touchdown run in bowl history.

"That run was one of those times when in the flash of an eye adversity turns to opportunity," the 46-year-old Baker says today. "It was a bitterly cold day in Philadelphia, where we were playing Villanova in the Liberty Bowl. Villanova punted and the ball went into the end zone, but the officials put it on the one-foot line.

## THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 9, No. 7 (1987)

---

"On first down, we ran a play that we shouldn't have: a roll-out in which I had to lose about five yards before getting into the play. A couple of their guys grabbed me in the end zone, and I barely slipped away from them. When I got to the line of scrimmage no one was near me, and I ran 99 yards alone. We won the game 6-0."

"Terry not only won the Liberty Bowl for us," says Prothro, who went on to coach UCLA, the Los Angeles Rams, and the San Diego Chargers, "but he flew down to Kentucky the next day for a basketball tournament that Oregon State was in and made the all-tournament team."

"Yet Terry was as fine a person as he was an athlete. His father deserted the family when Terry was only five, and his mother raised three boys by working at Sears & Roebuck. When Terry signed with the Rams, it was the first time in his life that he had any money. The first thing he did was take his mother to the circus, because she had never been able to go before."

That was one of the last good things that happened to Baker with the pros, however.

"Maybe I was at the wrong place at the wrong time," Baker says. "The Rams were so unorganized when I joined them that the coaches didn't know what was going on. I started my first game, and I was no more prepared to do that than the man in the moon. I threw three interceptions, and I think [Rams head coach] Harland Svare lost confidence in me right there."

"I didn't have a strong arm, and it soon got sore because the amount of passing one had to do in the pro game was more than I could take."

Svare, however, was convinced that there was more to Baker's arm troubles than arm troubles. After practice one day, he had Baker go see a psychiatrist.

"The guy took me in a room, turned off the lights, and asked me about my arm," Baker says. "I told him it hurt. He told me to think of someone and then asked me who it was. Well, it was right after practice, so I was thinking about Harland."

"The psychiatrist stood up, turned on the lights, and said, 'I've solved your problem. Your arm hates Harland.'"

"I was moved to halfback shortly after that."

Nagging injuries and a lack of speed kept Baker from being a standout halfback, and he was cut after the preseason in his fourth year by Svare's successor, George Allen. Contacted later in the season by the New York Giants, Baker passed up the chance to join them in order to remain full time in USC law school, which he had been attending in previous offseasons.

"Terry could have been successful in the NFL," Prothro says. "He was a lot like Brian Sipe, who wasn't given a chance until there was no one else. Terry would have made it if he had stayed around long enough and had been given a real opportunity."

Instead, the next year Baker joined Edmonton of the Canadian Football League. After learning the Canadian game early in the season, Baker took over and led the foundering team to an 8-1-1 finish and into the playoffs with an overall record of 10-5-1. In the playoffs Edmonton lost in sudden-death overtime to Saskatchewan.

"Terry did a good job and would have only gotten better," says Neill Armstrong, his coach at Edmonton, who later became the head coach of the Chicago Bears. "He could use the field well, could run, and kept the defenses a little off balance because he was lefthanded."

"I would like to have had him back, but he was at a time in his life that he had to make a decision if football was compatible with his ultimate career any more. It wasn't."

"I wanted to take the bar in Oregon before the season and in California after the season," Baker says. "I had reached an agreement with the team that I could report late so that I would be able to do that. But after a poor start in the exhibition season, the Edmonton management told me to come up right then. I used my legal skills and sort of negotiated myself right out of football."

# THE COFFIN CORNER: Vol. 9, No. 7 (1987)

The years since that sudden retirement have thinned Baker's hair, but tennis and handball have kept him the same muscular 210 pounds that he was when he created a legend that still lives in the northwest.

Today the man behind the legend has donated his Heisman Trophy to Oregon State University and works for a prominent Portland law firm that numbers among its clients the Portland Trail Blazers of the National Basketball Association.

"I represent some of the players when they are involved in litigation," Baker says. "That allows me to maintain at least a little contact with professional sports." He laughs. "And a little contact is about what I've always had."

\* \* \* \*

## TERRY WAYNE BAKER

Born: May 5, 1941, at Pine River, MN

Hgt: 6-3 Wgt: 205 College: Oregon State

YEAR	TEAM	-----PASSING-----						--RUSHING---				--RECEIVING--				
		AT	CO	PCT.	YDS	T	I	AT	YDS	AVG	T	NO	YDS	AVG	T	
1963	LARams	N	19	11	57.8	140	0	4	9	46	5.1	0	-	-	-	-
1964	LARams	N	1	0	00.0	0	0	0	24	82	3.4	0	8	92	11.5	0
1965	LARams	N	1	1	100.0	14	0	0	25	82	3.3	1	22	210	9.5	2
3 years			21	12	57.1	154	0	4	58	210	3.6	1	30	302	10.1	2