

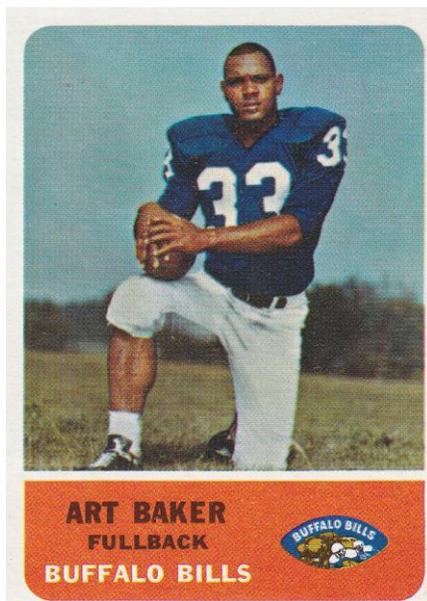


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Art Baker

This article was written by Greg D. Tranter

Art Baker was an All-American fullback that played in the same backfield as Heisman Trophy winner Ernie Davis at Syracuse University for their National Championship team of 1959. From Erie, PA he played for the Buffalo Bills in 1961 and 1962. He rushed for 498 yards and three touchdowns in 1961, the team rushing leader. He also had a 100-yard kickoff return for a touchdown in 1962. He played four seasons in the Canadian Football League following his two years with the Bills, with his team winning two Grey Cups.



Arthur R. Baker was born December 31, 1937 in Erie, Pennsylvania. He grew up in Erie and played high school football and wrestled at Erie Academy High School, graduating in June 1957. He won back to back district wrestling championships at 165 pounds in 1956 and at 185 pounds in 1957. He also scored four touchdowns and rushed for 183 yards in a high school football victory over Erie Strong Vincent in his senior year.

He attended Syracuse University beginning in the fall of 1957. The 6-foot, 200-pound muscular Baker played for the Syracuse varsity football team starting in his sophomore year in 1958. Baker started his first SU game in the 1958 opener against Boston College

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on September 27. Throughout the season he shared time with senior Tom Stephens at left halfback and he also played some fullback. He was named to the All-opponents teams by both Holy Cross and West Virginia.

He carried the ball 70 times for 312 yards with two touchdowns and he caught four passes for 42 yards and another TD. He was the team's third leading rusher. Syracuse finished the regular season 8-1 and lost to Oklahoma in the Orange Bowl 21-6. Baker carried the ball four times for 16 yards in the Orange's loss to the Sooners.

At the end of his sophomore year, the Kingston Daily reported "Art Baker, Syracuse's 198 pound sophomore left halfback, has much of the talent Jim Brown, now of the Cleveland Browns, showed at the same stage, according to opposing coaches."

Baker was also an outstanding wrestler at Syracuse and won the Eastern Intercollegiate Wrestling Association (EIWA) heavyweight championship on March 14, 1959 with a 4-2 decision over Penn State heavyweight Johnston Oberly.

On March 28, Art Baker put himself in the record books. He became the second African American and the first Syracuse wrestler to win a National Championship in wrestling when he defeated Michigan State grappler Tim Woodin 9-5 to claim the 191-pound title.

Baker began his junior season in style, helping lead the Syracuse football squad to an opening day win over a pesky Kansas team, 35-21. He was the top rusher in the game with 92 yards on 18 carries. He was voted top back in the game.

On October 10, Baker stole the show scoring on both offense and defense against the Navy. The Midshipmen drove to the Syracuse 8-yard line in the second quarter looking to tie the game at seven. Navy attempted a pass that Baker intercepted and using his 10.1 track speed sprinted 97-yards for a back breaking touchdown, giving the Orange a 14-0 lead. With Syracuse leading 21-0 in the third quarter, Baker put the game away with a spirited 13-yard touchdown run, carrying multiple Navy defenders into the end zone with him. Syracuse went on to win the game 32-6. Following the contest, Baker was named ECAC Player of the Week.

The Navy game was played in Norfolk, Virginia and Baker plus his teammates Ernie Davis and John Brown became the first three African Americans to play in the city's Oyster Bowl.

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In Syracuse's closest game of the season versus an undefeated #7 rated Penn State squad on November 7, Baker scored a critical touchdown for the Orange. With Syracuse clinging to a 7-6 lead in the third quarter SU Head Coach Ben Schwartzwalder decided to go for a fourth and goal from the Penn State five-yard line. Syracuse quarterback Dave Sarette faked a hand-off to Baker who then slipped through the line and received a lofted pass from Sarette, completely surprising the Nittany Lions in scoring the touchdown. Baker also contributed 66 yards rushing in the 20-18 Syracuse victory.

Syracuse finished off the regular season with three more dominant victories and headed to the Cotton Bowl to play Texas for the College Football National Championship.

In early December, Baker was named to the first team Associated Press All-East Football team along with backfield mate Gerald Schwedes. Syracuse had the nations' most dominant backfield with Baker running for 507 yards and clearing the path for Davis and Schwedes who contributed 686 and 567 yards respectively for the 10-0 Orangemen.

Syracuse dominated the Texas Longhorns in the Cotton Bowl on January 1, 1960, winning the NCAA National Championship with a 23-14 victory. Baker contributed his outstanding blocking and ran the ball six times for 26 yards in the historic victory. The 11-0 Orangemen won the first football National Championship in school history and is still the only one Syracuse has won.

With the football National Championship and his wrestling national title from earlier in 1959, Baker became the first and still only athlete in NCAA history to win two national titles in the same year in two different sports in Division I.

Baker decided not to wrestle following their National Championship football season, in the winter of 1960.

Baker's senior season was a little disappointing as Syracuse's football squad finished with a 7-2 record, losing close games to Pitt and Army. With those losses, Syracuse did not attend a bowl game at the end of the season.

His final football game at Syracuse was a 21-14 victory over Miami (FL). Baker contributed eight tackles and carried the ball five times for 31 yards as Syracuse completed their season rated #19 in the country.

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Baker rushed for 390 yards and scored two rushing TD's, both against West Virginia, for the season. He also had an outstanding year as a blocker and defender on the Syracuse defense. He was an under-rated defensive player throughout his SU career. He finished his Syracuse football career with 1,209 rushing yards and a 4.8 yard per carry average.

Baker was selected to play for the East Squad in the 1961 Hula Bowl. The game was played on January 8 in Honolulu with the East winning a defensive struggle 14-7. Baker was lauded for his outstanding play on defense in the game.

Baker was selected by the Buffalo Bills in the third round of the 1961 AFL Draft on November 21, 1960. He was the 18th overall pick.

Baker was also selected by the Philadelphia Eagles in the NFL Draft conducted on December 27, 1960. The Eagles selected him in the first round, the 14th overall selection. He was the final player taken in the first round.

Baker signed with the Bills on February 8, 1961. When Buffalo Head Coach Buster Ramsey signed Baker, he indicated he would play Baker on offense at running back. Baker said he did not sign with the Eagles because, they "made me feel as if they didn't want me. They did not get in touch with me until a week after their draft."

Baker was chosen to play for the East squad in the first coaches' All-America Bowl game in Buffalo on June 23, 1961. It was the first professional game for Baker and the other college players. Baker starred in the game at War Memorial Stadium, scoring a touchdown on a screen pass from Fran Tarkenton, racing his way into the end zone. He was also the East's leading rusher with 35 yards on six carries including runs of 18 and 15 yards. The East All-Stars lost to the West 30-20, but Baker was voted the runner-up player of the game.

Baker impressed in the Bills training camp and earned a roster spot on the 1961 team, coached by Ramsey. Baker played all 14 games for the 6-8 Bills. He was the team's primary fullback carrying the ball 152 times for 498 yards. He led the team in rushing, was sixth in the AFL in carries and seventh in yards. He was regarded as one of the most powerful runners in football.

Baker came on as the season progressed, gaining 391 yards, and averaging 3.76 yards per carry over the final seven games. He rushed for 117 yards on 31 carries in the team's

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final game of the season, a 28-10 loss to San Diego. It was Baker's first and only 100-yard game of his AFL career and the 31 carries was an AFL record at the time. The week prior, he rushed for 97 yards and two touchdowns in leading the Bills to a 26-21 victory over the Oakland Raiders. His first professional touchdown came in the Bills 41-21 victory over the New York Titans on September 17 at War Memorial Stadium. He scored on a one-yard plunge in the second quarter, cutting the Bills deficit to 17-14.

In the offseason, Baker began a professional wrestling career.

The Bills drafted Baker's college running mate Ernie Davis in the 1962 AFL draft. However, Davis chose to sign with Cleveland. With the Bills failing to land Davis, they signed CFL free agent Cookie Gilchrist to be their primary fullback in 1962. Baker was relegated to back-up duty and returning kicks.

In the Bills 1962 opening game, a 28-23 loss to Houston, Baker returned a third quarter kick-off 100-yards for a touchdown, cutting the Oilers lead to 28-9. It was the second kick-off return TD in Bills history.

In the Bills week three loss to the Titans, 17-6, Baker injured his knee on a kick-off return in the third quarter. He underwent knee surgery on October 12 and was lost for the season. Baker finished his second Bills season, and what would be his last, with only two carries for nine yards, three pass receptions for 12 yards and seven kick-offs averaging 31.3 yards per return and the one TD.

Baker returned to the Bills for their 1963 training camp. He had a solid camp, playing in the Bills four preseason contests. He rushed for 111 yards, caught seven passes for 49 more and returned six kickoffs averaging 33 yards per. He scored two TDs, a 13-yard run in the first quarter and a 2-yard plunge in the second quarter, in Buffalo's 21-14 exhibition win over Denver in Winston Salem. However, he also lost two fumbles that probably did him in. A few days after the final exhibition game, Baker was cut by the Bills in their final roster moves before the start of the regular season.

He was not a free agent for long, signing a contract with the Canadian Football League's Hamilton Tiger-Cats on September 11.

Baker played in four regular season games for the Tiger-Cats in 1963, gaining 154 yards on 18 carries and two TDs as Hamilton won all four games. Baker picked the first game

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of the Eastern Conference Finals to have his breakout game. In Hamilton's 45-0 trouncing of Ottawa, Baker rushed for 124 yards on 20 carries.

Two weeks later, Baker helped lead Hamilton to the 1963 Grey Cup Championship. He scored a touchdown on a one-yard run in the second quarter, putting Hamilton up 14-3 on their way to a 21-10 win over the British Columbia Lions. He also contributed 52 rushing yards on 11 attempts along with his stellar blocking in the victory.

Baker had his best professional season in 1964, leading the Tiger-Cats in rushing with 726 yards on 150 attempts and 3 TDs. He also scored another touchdown on a pass reception in leading Hamilton to a 10-3-1 regular season and a return trip to the Grey Cup. Baker was the third leading rusher in the Eastern Conference and was named to the All-East CFL All-Star first team at fullback, for his impressive season.

Hamilton lost the Grey Cup to British Columbia in a rematch of the 1963 Championship, 34-24. Baker who missed Hamilton's Eastern Conference Final victory the week before, due to injury, played in the Grey Cup but was not able to be a difference maker in the Tiger-Cats defeat.

Baker was having another successful season in 1965 for Hamilton before a broken bone in his foot cost him the rest of the season. He rushed for 555 yards on 114 rushes which was leading the team and third in the CFL East at the time of his injury. Hamilton finished the regular season with a 10-4 record and swept through the CFL playoffs, capturing their second Grey Cup Championship in three years with a 22-16 win over Winnipeg. Baker sat out the game with his injury.

Baker missed the first three games to start the 1966 season, played in a 16-8 loss to Montreal on August 24, scoring Hamilton's only touchdown, and was sold to the Calgary Stampeders five days later.

He played three games for the Stampeders gaining 123 yards on 35 carries. On September 20 they waived him. He had a 10-day tryout with Montreal, but never signed. He was re-signed by the Tiger Cats on October 15 as injury protection, but never played and was subsequently waived, ending his CFL career.

Baker retired from football at the end of the 1966 season. He concluded his CFL career with 1,601 rushing yards and a 4.9 per carry average.

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He won a national championship at Syracuse in football, won an individual wrestling national title, two Grey Cup championships in the CFL with Hamilton and participated in the establishment of the American Football League in Buffalo, an impressive athletic career to say the least.

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