Immaculate History

Three Rivers Stadium is gone now, but the memory of what happened there 40 years ago on December 23, 1972, lives on. That day Jim Baker, an insurance salesman from West Mifflin, rushed to bring his wife Mary and infant son Sam home from the hospital before heading off with nephew Bobby Pavuchak to the Steelers AFC Divisional playoff game. They arrived to the game a little late, but settled in to watch, unaware that they would become part of one of the great stories in sport that day. With just 22 seconds left and with the Oakland Raiders leading the Steelers 7-6, quarterback Terry Bradshaw faced a fourth-and-10 situation from his own 40-yard line. He dropped back to pass, but Raider pressure flushed him from the pocket. Spotting Frenchy Fuqua, Bradshaw sailed a pass down the middle. Fuqua and Oakland’s Jack Tatum reached for the ball, but it popped from their arms. Rookie running back Franco Harris miraculously snatched it up at shoelace level and raced into the end zone. As Three Rivers Stadium erupted in celebration, Baker grabbed his nephew and joined the hundreds of fans jumping off the dugouts and onto the field.

Baker headed for the end zone where security staff struggled to push the fans back. As he made his way there, he remembers watching the officials to see what would happen. As *The Pittsburgh Press* recounted several days later, “Baker kept his eye on the ball, which was scooped up by an official.” After a delay, the game officials ruled the play a touchdown and set the ball for the extra point. The ground crew failed to raise the nets and the ball sailed through the uprights, hit the concrete wall behind, and bounced into the end zone. Baker dove for it, battling a pack of fans. His coat and pants were torn and he picked up some bruises and a sore neck. But in the end, Baker latched onto the ball, tucked it under his shirt, grabbed his nephew, and ran for the parking lot. Once there he worried
about the ball being stolen from him. He flagged down a man and woman, who had listened to the game on the radio as they sat parked in a lot near Three Rivers. Baker offered them money to drive him to his car downtown; they gave him a lift but were content to hold the ball and hear his story.

Once home, Baker posed for pictures and began bragging about his hard-won trophy of the game. Neighbors, who had dropped by to see the new baby, were instead treated to Baker’s story and the chance to see the game ball. That night Myron Cope referred on air to the Harris touchdown by the name given him by listener Sharon Levosky, calling it the Immaculate Reception. Baker’s brother-in-law, a photographer for The Pittsburgh Press, brought a reporter to the house and a story on the ball ran five days later with the family photo seen here. Tony Stagno, of Stagno’s bakery and a founder of Franco’s Italian Army, offered Baker some “dough” and free birthday cakes for life, but Jim wasn’t biting. Instead, he held onto the ball, storing it securely and bringing it out for special occasions, such as the play’s or catch’s 25th anniversary in 1997. Baker has preserved the ball for 40 years, lending it to the History Center for the first time, for display in Gridiron Glory: The Best of the Pro Football Hall of Fame.