GEORGE

PLIMPTON

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PAPER LION

CONFESSIONS OF A LAST-STRING QUARTERBACK

FOREWORD BY NICHOLAS DAWIDOFF

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GEORGE PLIMPTON

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Begin Reading

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For a living dog is better than a dead lion.

—Eccles. 9:4

Foreword

by Nicholas Dawidoff

The problem with football writing has always been access, the fundamental elusiveness. How to overcome the crowd of armored players, the blur of motion, the anonymous wreckage after the tackle, the coded playbooks, the fenced-off team "facilities," the self-effacing conformity of it all? Secretive by nature, football defies anybody from the outside to get close enough to achieve the clarity and insight excellent writing requires.

In exclusion George Plimpton saw opportunity. Plimpton, the first editor of the *Paris Review,* was a privileged New Yorker who had spent his life in the most rarefied American communities. The quality that shines through *Paper Lion,* the greatest of all football books, is Plimpton's absolute conviction that he belongs. As a writer Plimpton was always more Paris than review, more safari-jacketed adventurer than urban belle-lettrist. That is to say, by procedural instinct he first walked among the fauna native to an exotic landscape—boxing rings, baseball diamonds, racetracks—and then returned to far East 72nd Street to convey their essence.

And so it was on fields strewn with (Detroit) Lions. Plimpton's solution to the problem of seeing football clearly was to get in the game. And while his playing pro football was assuredly a stunt, doing the daydream was also a terrific idea—so beautifully direct. Not only would participating in the Lions' training camp as a last-string quarterback help Plimpton to see behind the face mask, but it would also allow him to engage with the vicarious impulse at the heart of sporting spectatorship. Plimpton wrote

Paper Lion in what was still a Walter Mitty era of armchair fandom when from the bleachers all reveries were plausible. The peerless baseball writer Roger Angell, who began covering his sport for *The New Yorker* by attending spring training in 1962, the year before Plimpton joined the Lions, said, “We used to think, with a little luck *we* could have been doing this. Nobody thinks that anymore. Today he’d get hurt.” Angell considers it “amazing the Lions let him do it. They loved it. Could have been the opposite. He must have been extremely charming. George was very enthusiastic.”

He was also an unlikely candidate for a mauling. A man about Harvard, the New Journalism cocktail circuit, and Kennedy administration skating parties (Muhammad Ali nicknamed him “Kennedy”), Plimpton’s football pedigree was modest. He was built “along the lines of a stick” and had been cut from his high-school junior varsity. But all that was exactly the point here, and besides, Plimpton had other qualities. A youthful thirty-six when he joined the Lions, our man was tall, boyish, nervy, socially at ease in unfamiliar settings, and a person unlikely to allow his sense of self to become contingent on how well he played football. Among the Lions, Plimpton was always the confident, charming writer, glad to wear jersey number zero because he understood that his athletic incompetence was useful to his story.

All the best immersive reporters have a gift for self-fashioning, and Plimpton was a master. By 1963, he’d cultivated a patrician accent so affected even people who’d seen it all, like the writer Roy Blount, shook their heads in admiration. And yet Plimpton was also the sort of man capable of seamlessly dropping his y’alls from the moment he hit the Mason-Dixon Line. When Roger Angell was a boy growing up in New York, he admired the New York Giants’ left-handed screwball pitcher Carl Hubbell above all players. Angell heard that the accumulated strains of breaking off his signature pitch meant that Hubbell’s left palm faced permanently outward. So Angell began walking around with his arm to port similarly contorted. Angell’s mother, alarmed, told him, “Don’t do that, Rog.” Angell recounted this to Plimpton, and soon enough word filtered to Angell of Plimpton, whose childhood love of Carl Hubbell was such that—get this!—he’d kept his arm bent in salutation until his mother told him to straighten up. Angell didn’t hold this against Plimpton; inhabiting other

people’s lives was simply what Plimpton did.

At the Lions’ training camp Plimpton insinuated himself with ease, retailing apocryphal tales of his amateur days as a member of the Newfoundland Newfs. If his throwing arm was weak, come evening the Plimpton leg was stout enough to keep up with the big cats out at the Dearborn, Michigan, watering holes. Most people are susceptible to admiration, and the Lions quickly embraced the sustained attention of such a shimmering, seductive appreciator. They didn’t care that he was lousy at football. They admired him for risking it, and for making what they did seem worthy of personal sacrifice, staying with them through the rugged hardships of camp. And Plimpton was sedulous about doing nothing to compromise the mission: “I behaved, of course.”

I read *Paper Lion* first as a boy, and I still have my old childhood copy, a ninety-five-cent Pocket paperback. To look again at those disintegrating pages with their pale pink edges, some of them loosened from the spine and jammed back in haphazardly, is to recall what heady entry into an adult world it provided, a physical world of men. The pros were professionally accomplished at so many masculine arts: banter, beer drinking, vomiting (too much beer), games of chance, pranks, and post-curfew sneak-outs. There were exciting gambits like calling in to a popular restaurant under the name of the team owner to cadge a reservation (only to come upon said owner). There were women to meet out at dance halls, in tight slacks and mohair sweaters the color of pink spun sugar, and women to revel in from afar while watching them play tennis. And there were men playing football, so much football so memorably described.

The campus of the Cranbrook School where the Lions lived and trained was a gift to the writer, the contrast of rough game and sylvan setting one of the many juxtapositions that threads through *Paper Lion,* enlivening that central juxtaposition of amateur among professionals, elitist intellectual amid hard-hat muscle. Plimpton relates football as a game of intricate physical actions that are also often amusing because the players are so big, the actions so unique to the activity. After Plimpton compares centering a ball to a cow at milking, who could ever consider the hiker without thinking Holstein? Similarly, as soon as we observe massive men attempting to sleep as they overflow dormitory beds designed for teenage schoolboys, the scale of human we are dealing with becomes indelible.

Plimpton is a collector of small interactions in a volatile world. When I reached back into my old Pocket book, treats from the football day-to-day were extracted again in a rush: the account of former Lion coach Buddy Parker responding to losses by disrobing and dispensing with his (unlucky) suits of clothing, sometimes by stuffing costly jackets, ties, and trousers out the windows of speeding trains; the way players thought about the after-practice vats of lemonade awaiting them on those scorching Michigan summer days; the anxiety of the rookies forced to stand during meals and sing their school fight songs for the veterans; the steep alps of food the players put on their plates; the exaggerated reactions of headman George Wilson and the other Lion coaches during their downtime games of liars' poker; the reserve quarterback Earl Morrall generously throwing after-practice passes to a line of children—one of them a swift, sure-handed ball thief.

Football is the national passion, ever changing. Yet fifty years later *Paper Lion* still feels contemporary. That's because the book is a tour de force of vivid characters who become the Ur–football team. A football roster is scores of men, yet from just the few weeks Plimpton spent with the team, there's the necessary illusion of comprehensiveness; we feel we know them all. Several of the best were absent from Cranbrook that summer. The unruly lineman Big Daddy Lipscomb and the bantam-cock quarterback Bobby Layne had by then retired. Alex Karras, a nearsighted All-Pro defensive tackle, was famed within the team for his impromptu skits and monologues. But Karras had been suspended by the league for his underworld consortings. Plimpton clearly perceived it as an advantage that the trio was offstage; all three became entirely his. The players surrounding him provided as well, none better than Dick "Night Train" Lane, the Hall of Fame cornerback we meet up with in his dorm room dressed in a siren suit of his own design, listening to his wife Dinah Washington's R & B records on a portable stereo. Lane holds forth on the art of defense with a barrage of suffixy linguistic formulations—his "captainship"—that allow Plimpton to forever make him football's Lester Young. From these men we grasp football's strange high-low counterpoint—the big business of roughhousing. And while Plimpton may have behaved, he doesn't duck the trouble he sees, writing well, if without strong judgment, about race, addiction, and the ruthless ways of management. A very clear picture

develops of how the day-to-day professional game works.

We get a very clear portrait of Plimpton too. Old Number Zero is a complicated proposition, a football ethnographer, a football interloper, and a football foil. The action in *Paper Lion* reaches an anticlimax with the five plays Plimpton quarterbacks at the team scrimmage held at Pontiac stadium, a stricken sequence that gives way to Plimpton's gradual realization that the fans didn't understand "the lunacy of my participation" and thought his ineptitude was a gag, a football Al Schacht routine. But Plimpton was a committed competitor. It's just that he saw the playing field delimits a bit more expansively than a hundred yards of gridiron.

For all the world-class athletes at Plimpton's literary disposal, *Paper Lion*'s top-billed performer is always Plimpton. His book is the culmination of a long game in which he is in unstated competition with all those Lion players, out to prove that his literary athleticism is even more entertaining than what they can muster on white-lined grass. He wins because he makes those forgotten practices involving distant players forever alive. Fleet, vain split end Gail Cogdill, lineman John Gordy called "the Bear" for a thick thatch of body hair, lady-killing defensive back Ricky LeBeau, the up-for-it utilityman Jim "Marine" Martin, the gregarious and tragic rookie lineman Lucien Reeberg—we remember them all because of skinny George. Of course Plimpton chose to be a quarterback. The quarterback is the writer, the one who makes it up, makes it happen. It was always going to be about him, and what lends the book its true imaginative distinction is Plimpton's inner life, those meandering within-the-helmet soliloquies, each of them funnier and more weirdly informative than the last.

As Plimpton recounts early on in *Paper Lion,* finding a football organization that would allow him to suit up was not easy. One team official told Plimpton, "You got to realize professional football is a serious business." Other teams thought the Lions were crazy to put themselves at risk by exposing themselves to a writer, but how provident for the Lions that they did. Such are the joys of the book, every Thanksgiving when the Lions play their traditional holiday game, generations of *Paper Lion* readers all over America take to their TVs to pull for the blue and silver.

Other writers' debts are on paper. By inventing an immersive genre, Plimpton gave otherwise obstructed observers the means for seeing distant subjects up close. As a young writer at *Sports Illustrated,* I traveled to

Boston to talk hitting with Red Sox batting coach Walter Hriniak, an impresario of his time. It was challenging to understand the subtleties of Hriniak's methods, so at a certain point I asked if the coach might watch me hit a few and evaluate my swing. A look of dismay crossed his face. But fortunately for me there was a bystander who cried, "A Plimpton!" Just like that, Hriniak understood, and my encounter with the professional was assured.

CHAPTER 1

I decided finally to pack the football. It was a slightly used Spalding ball, an expensive one, with the information printed on it that it was “triple-lined and lock-stitched.” Its sponsoring signature was that of Norman Van Brocklin, the ex–Philadelphia Eagle quarterback. It seemed a little deflated. I pressed it down hard against the shirts and was able to get the canvas suitcase cover zipped up around it. It was the bulkiest item in the suitcase, and the bulge of it was noticeable. I had two sweat suits in there, a pair of football shoes, some socks, a book on football formations written by a high-school coach, a sports coat and some trousers, and a few other things.

I was not sure what I was going to need at the training camp. The Detroit Lion officials had not sent me the sort of list one remembered from boys’ camp—that one should bring a pillowcase, a mattress cover, a flashlight, a laundry bag, etc. I assumed I could buy what I was lacking at the nearest town. I carried the suitcase down to the street and went out to Kennedy airport to catch an airplane to Detroit. From there I would go by car an hour north to Cranbrook, a boys’ private school near Bloomfield Hills, whose athletic facilities were being used by the Detroit Lions for their preseason training. I was going there as the Lions’ “last-string quarterback”—as my friends referred to it—to join the team as an amateur to undergo firsthand the life of the professional and, hopefully, to describe the experience in a book.

I had written one such book—a recounting of my turbulent experiences pitching in Yankee Stadium in a postseason major-league All-Star game. *Out of My League* the book was called, and it described what happened to someone with the temerity to climb the field-box railings to try the sport

oneself, just to see how one got along and what happened. The notion behind the book was to play out the fantasies, the daydreams that so many people have—seeing themselves on the center court at Wimbledon, or sinking long putts in the U.S. Open, or ripping through the Green Bay secondary. I had been able to arrange with the baseball game's promoters to play. Ernest Hemingway had thought it an odd if interesting experiment and he described the difficulties of my participation as "the dark side of the moon of Walter Mitty." Other friends were more critical. "Why do you want to embarrass yourself like that?" they asked. "It's terrible. Either you're the most frustrated athlete there ever was, or you're nuts."

"Well, the idea is also to get a firsthand knowledge of the professional athlete," I said. "By being one of them, in a sense—being a teammate."

"Sure," they said. "Some teammate. Well, all right, what are you going to do next?"

"The Detroit Lions are allowing me to go through training with them," I was able to say after I had worked it out with them. "They're going to let me play in a few games."

My friends were skeptical. "Sure, sure," they said.

During the earlier part of that July month I had been practicing strenuously with the Spalding ball. On New York City weekdays, with friends working in their offices, it was difficult finding someone with whom to throw; but I would take the ball out to Central Park, trotting along the paths in a sweat suit, bringing the knees up high, then launching into an occasional sprint, with the arm held out straight to ward off an imaginary tackler, and then in the open stretches, out in the meadows where two elderly men were helping some children fly a box kite, I would rear back and throw the ball. It would arch through the air, bounce down the field, and rock abruptly to a stop in the grass. I would fetch it. Then I would throw it again. Without someone to throw to, it was a melancholy practice—to throw a ball in a park meadow and then walk to it, and throw it again—and I did it in a sort of dull, bored way so that if anyone caught me at it, if one of the elderly men looked away from his box kite, it would appear that I had nothing better to do while awaiting the arrival of friends, obviously delayed in traffic, for a touch football game. Sometimes, I punted the ball. Once I kicked it off the side of my foot into the infield of a baseball game, and the black-shirted players began shouting, "Arriba! Arriba!" and waving their

arms as if what had dropped down among them was a large buzzard. July was not the seasonal month to be carrying a football around in Central Park, and I didn’t go out too often. I threw the ball around in my apartment, which is a sort of studio, long enough to allow a throw into an armchair from twenty or twenty-five feet away—keeping at it when I had the chance, if only to get used to the feel of the ball.