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In a League of His Own

George Plimpton fought Archie Moore, pitched to Willie Mays and quarterbacked the Lions.



George Plimpton (wearing number 0) at Detroit Lions training camp in 1963. PHOTO: SPORTS ILLUSTRATED/GETTY IMAGES

By Edward Kosner
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The lanky rookie right-hander nervously toes the pitcher's rubber alone on the mound at Yankee Stadium under a dazzling October sky, the crowd in the stands a distant murmur. At the plate, 60 feet, 6 inches away, stands Willie Mays, eyes bright, eager, his bat cocked over his right shoulder in the sunshine. George Plimpton goes into his awkward windup and flings the ball toward the plate. Mays swings . . . and pops out!

There could not have been a man or boy reading "Out of My League" more than a half-century ago who did not picture himself in Plimpton's spikes living the dream of actually pitching to major leaguers. In fact, Plimpton's turn on the mound before a 1958 exhibition game ended ignominiously. He nearly passed out after hurling 70-odd pitches to seven National League All-Stars. That hardly detracted from his achievement: Better than anyone before him—or since—Plimpton, the aristocratic editor of the literary Paris Review, re-created the experience of participating in big-time sports, the fantasy of generations of weekend duffers, tennis hackers, softball sluggers and Little League dads.

Now seven of Plimpton's sports books are being reissued by Little, Brown in a handsome uniform edition, and they are a delight—more entertaining, if possible, than I remembered. "Out of My League" (151 pages, \$20) was the first; it was followed by the best-selling "Paper Lion" (360 pages, \$20), in which Plimpton scrimmaged as the last-string quarterback with the Detroit Lions before the 1963 NFL season. Besides his baseball and football non-herosics, Plimpton, who died at 76 in 2003, played in three pro-am golf tournaments in "The Bogey Man" (284 pages, \$20); went three rounds with the light-heavyweight champ Archie Moore in "Shadow Box" (347 pages, \$20); and played goalie for the Boston Bruins of the National Hockey League in "Open Net" (270 pages, \$20).

He thought of these adventures as "participatory journalism," but he was really an ethnographer venturing with his spiral notebook into exotic subcultures off-limits to civilians and returning with detailed reports of the tribal rituals of the natives and—literally—what it felt like to try to join them in their often bloody manhood rites.

A true amateur in the classic sense of the term, Plimpton was the perfect man for the job: intelligent, inquisitive, deferential, discreet and riskier to the specimens he encountered. A wiry 6-foot-4, he was willing to gear life and limb—and worse, humiliation—to research his books. Sports writing these days can be obsessed with the avariciousness, narcissism and sheer loudness of pro athletes. But they're all good guys in Plimpton's books. There's not a hint of performance-enhancing drugs—or even those ubiquitous amphetamine "greenies"—in Plimpton's locker rooms. There are just two anodyne references to sex in the whole set, although the players do tend to "go into town" a lot after practices.

The pleasure of Plimpton's company is so intense that even the occasional languorous passages and conspicuous padding in the 1,841 total pages of these seven books glide by without unduly taxing the reader's patience. His prose is as elegant and seemingly effortless as Ted Williams's swing or an Arnold Palmer iron shot.

Reflecting on his Yankee Stadium debut, he writes, "the simple, basic sensations came to mind . . . the warmth of the sun, and the smell of leather, the . . . oil sweating out of the glove's pocket in the heat, and the cool of the grass and the dirt when the sun's shadow fell across it late in the afternoon, and the sharp cork sounds of the bats against each other, and the rich smell of grass torn by spikes." The unadorned, rhythmic language is reminiscent of Hemingway, who makes vivid cameos in several of the books.

Plimpton was a polymath. Besides founding and, for a half-century, editing the Paris Review, he wrote, co-wrote or edited 52 books and enjoyed renown as a TV pitchman and fireworks impresario. He knew nearly everyone worth knowing, including the Camelot crowd. Muhammad Ali called him "Kennedy." Still, he is best known for "Paper Lion," his misadventures as a quarterback with the Detroit NFL team, first published in 1965.

"Paper Lion" perfected the formula that Plimpton would deploy in his participatory books. Wandering into training camp with a bag of ragtag equipment, he slowly ingratiates himself with the athletes and coaches, sitting with the rookies in the dining hall, studying his playbook, going out for beers with the veterans. He brings along a small library, mostly arcane old manuals and stat books that he bones up on and quotes. He records the players' tall stories and practical jokes, their triumph memories and miseries, their fears and dreams. Big personalities take the stage—among them, in "Paper Lion," the brainy offensive guard John Gordy and Dick "Night Train" Lane, the brilliant cornerback with a language of his own.

Talking about the changes in football since his own "commencementship," Night Train tells the writer: "These days when Sunday rolls aroun', there's like to be too much kibitzing going on, which ought to be left in the bedroom." Another player sums it up: "Football's all humiliation."

The high point of these plays is always Plimpton's brief sequence of actual action. In "Paper Lion," he learns five plays to run as quarterback in a scrimmage against the first-string defense before a big crowd in Pontiac, Mich. Wearing number 0, he gets the ball on his own 30. He fumbles on his first play when he collides with the guard Gordy, falls down untouched on his second play, and, handing off too late to a running back on his third play, has the ball stripped away by a giant, defending only to be saved by the referee whistling the play dead. After an incomplete pass, Plimpton flips to another running back, who is nailed on the 1-yard line. In his five plays, he has managed to lose 29 yards, barely avoiding the mortification of a safety in his own end zone.

He doesn't fare much better against Archie Moore, who seemed to think that Plimpton's name was "Bill" or "Roger" when they spar in "Shadow Box." "He came at me quite briskly," Plimpton writes, "and as I poked at him tentatively, his left reached out and thumped me alarmingly. As he moved around the ring, he made a curious humming sound in his throat . . . except from time to time the hum would rise quite abruptly, and bang! He could cuff me alongside the head." Plimpton survives, and the book gets down to its real subject: Ali's monumental fights with Sonny Liston, Joe Frazier and George Foreman, the last being the 1974 "Rumble in the Jungle" in Zaire, when Ali regained the heavyweight title stripped from him because he refused to serve during the Vietnam War. Plimpton's straightforward, evocative portrait of Ali compares favorably with Norman Mailer's ornate boxing arias.

His sole quasi-successful outing takes place in "Open Net"—five minutes in goal for the 1977-78 Bruins before a preseason game against the dread Philadelphia Flyers on their home ice. Of all the professional athletes he spends time with, Plimpton seems to like the hockey players the most. Country boys from provincial Canada, they turn out to be smart and articulate. He's pleased to find that three of the Bruins are reading John Toland's biography of Hitler.

After weeks of coaching, he finally dons the goalie's heavy pads, clutching his stick with a huge padded gauntlet, and slides out on the ice to confront the Flyers in the raucous arena. The first shot whistles into the net behind him before he even sees it. But he settles down and holds his own. To make sure he has the full experience, his teammates contrive to cause a rare penalty shot, and Plimpton, wearing uniform 00, finds Flyers right-wing Reggie Leach barreling toward him, the puck curled on his stick. Plimpton skates out to cut off his angle, flops on the ice and Leach's shot glances harmlessly off one of his skates. Victory—of a sort—at last!

The other three entries in the Plimpton set—the golf book "Bogey Man"; "One for the Record" (193 pages, \$20), about Hank Aaron breaking Babe Ruth's record of 714 home runs; and "Mad Ducks and Bears" (251 pages, \$20), in which the old Lion John Gordy and Alex Karras, the rambunctious defensive tackle, basically tell pro-football war stories—have their rewards but don't really compare to his best.

Closing the last of the series, the reader leaves George Plimpton's wide world of sports with deep reluctance. His teammates recede—like the old baseball players vanishing into the cornfield in "Field of Dreams," taking their magical world with them but living on in fond memory.

—Mr. Kosner is the author of "It's News to Me," a memoir of his career as the editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News.

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