



## Paper Lion: Confessions of a Last-String Quarterback

*George Plimpton*

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This paperback edition commemorates the 40th anniversary of the original publication of this sports classic.

## **Paper Lion: Confessions of a Last-String Quarterback Details**

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Author : George Plimpton

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## From Reader Review Paper Lion: Confessions of a Last-String Quarterback for online ebook

### Andrew says

Excellent summer reading. Maybe a bit too technical at times for people with only a cursory knowledge of football, but I particularly liked those bits because it's interesting to see what stage the game had developed to in the 60s. When they talk about the Shotgun formation JUST being invented, it's really pretty alarming.

Of course the actual game is secondary to what's going on here. Plimpton's perspective allows for a vivid portrait of the league back then. It's pretty scary, to be honest. It seems to me most of the players' careers are cut short through injuries or illness, the most tragic of all is Reeberg, a young player who dies at 22 because he wouldn't disclose to a doctor a kidney condition, fearing it would hurt his chances at making the team.

The book is very funny and full of many of the ups and downs anyone who has been on a solid team knows all too well and probably misses. What stuck out to me though was life after football for these players. Plimpton goes back to his cushy Harvard-bred life, editing and writing. Not that he's exploited them or anything like that, it just made me sad that so many of these players who were so loved in Detroit had to struggle for a living after their bodies were shot to hell on the playing field. This is especially pertinent in today's league where people are still fighting for pension packages for these legendary players who paved the way for the huge contracts dished out today. Reading the additional bio notes included, you realize players back then couldn't be JUST football players. After football, they'd have many different careers, most players having more than one. They appear to be admirably well-rounded, hard-working individuals far from the image of the spoiled athlete so prevalent today.

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### Scott says

Plimpton traces his own experiences in Lions training camp at the end of the franchise's golden era in the early 1960s. I remember this book on my father's shelf when I was a boy and when I asked him about it recently, he began to recite scenes from memory - clearly it made an impression on him as a young sportscaster. It's well-written and made me wish Plimpton had been more of a contemporary. The stories capture an NFL long since past, where training camps, drafts, and gameplans were more simple activities. Given the complexity and money in current pro football, it is striking to read about the small distances between fans and players, the lazy nature of the business, and informality of gameplanning. Yet, it seemed that about 90% of what Plimpton discusses about football strategy, violence, professionalism, and myth some 50 years ago still echoes throughout the sport today. In some ways it suggests the game is more timeless than one might think, or perhaps less optimistically, a game that is more rooted in basic human instincts than many care to admit. A great sports read and a must-read for any football fan.

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### Mike says

This is a pretty solid look at what it was like to play pro football in the early 60s. By today's standards, it's pretty quaint. I couldn't fathom an author today naive enough to think he can jump in and play professional QB without even pee-wee experience at the position. It's entertaining, though, and it kept my interest.

Stephen Fatsis wrote a book last year about being a placekicker in training camp with a modern team, and I'm going to read that soon to see how it compares.

If you think back to the era of Mad Men, this is another reminder of how different things were just 50 years ago.

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### **Julia Ostash (fictionalovers) says**

Paper Lion was a semi-sweet non-fictional novel about a writer who joins the 1963 Detroit Lions to write about what it's like to be on a football team. The story was heartfelt and very technical.

full review: <http://burgersandbooks.weebly.com/blo...>

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### **Scott Foshee says**

Paper Lion is perhaps the first behind the scenes look at a pro football training camp. The excellent George Plimpton, first Editor in Chief of the Paris Review, wrote a series of pieces using "participatory journalism," a technique where he actually joined in the games he covered. In 1958 he pitched against National League all-stars in an exhibition baseball game at Yankee Stadium and wrote about it in his book "Out of My League." While on assignment with Sports Illustrated he stepped in the ring for three rounds with boxing legends Archie Moore and Sugar Ray Robinson. He trained as a goalie and took a turn between the pipes for the Boston Bruins in an NHL preseason game, writing about it in his book "Open Net." He also took turns golfing on the PGA tour ("The Bogey Man"), playing Pancho Gonzalez in tennis, playing world-class bridge, walking the tightrope as a circus performer, and more.

George joins the NFL's Detroit Lions for their 1963 preseason training camp trying to make the team, a 36 year old league rookie, as their "last string quarterback." The coaches know that a writer is in their midst, but the players, at least initially, do not. Plimpton formulates an elaborate story about having played quarterback the previous season in Canada for the "Newfoundland Newfs," but his cover is blown in one of several laugh out loud funny scenes the first time he attempts to take a snap from center and doesn't know where to put his hands.

Plimpton lives with the team throughout training camp, attends the meetings, studies the plays, participates in night raids on other players wearing 'fright masks,' and spends exhausting days with them on the practice field, notebook and pencil ever at the ready and often stashed when he is called onto the field. We meet legendary characters such as cornerback Dick "Night Train" Lane (who was married to singer Dinah Washington), middle linebacker Joe Schmidt (Pro Football Hall of Fame, 1973), and the incomparable Alex Karras, defensive tackle and actor (Blazing Saddles, Webster). Karras was on suspension that year (along with Paul Hornug) for gambling, but makes appearances in Paper Lion nonetheless through the hysterical stories of his teammates. The 1968 film version of Paper Lion does feature the reinstated Karras, incidentally, who very nearly steals the show from star Alan Alda and launches his own screen career.

Plimpton has a gift for understatement. He enters the story with the uninitiated eyes of the average "everyman" allowing the reader to jump right in and experience everything "firsthand" through him. We are there with him when he finally takes the field in an intra-squad scrimmage in Pontiac Michigan before of

thousands of Lions fans who wonder exactly who this new player is wearing the number "0" jersey. Plimpton actually ends up taking five snaps in the game, running each of the five plays he has learned, with hilarious results.

Paper Lion was one of the first glimpses behind the scenes into the world of NFL football, and it was a huge hit. Paper Lion is a fun and somewhat revealing read, but I am left wondering if pro sports of the early 1960's was really full of the innocent fun portrayed here, or if more incriminating things were left out as revealed in books which came out soon thereafter such as Ball Four by Jim Bouton (1970), which chronicled the rampant womanizing, alcohol, and drug abuse in the far less violent world of professional baseball. Plimpton briefly touches on the problems of alcohol and gambling, but I am left wondering what else could have been said.

Special Note: Alex Karras' own book about his playing days, titled "Even Big Guys Cry," is another terrific read. Even though it is out of print, it's stories of football legends "Champagne" Bobby Layne and Eugene "Big Daddy" Lipscomb are true gems that will have you rolling with laughter. If you can find it I highly recommend picking it up.

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### **Corinna says**

quest'uomo è diventato il mio eroe!! da giornalista a (quasi) QB di una squadra dell'NFL..  
In più, adesso sono preparatissima sui Lions dei primi anni '60 :)

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### **Jennie says**

I was pleasantly surprised by the detail about what it would be like to be a player for a professional football team. Plimpton doesn't try to make his skills to be more (or less) than they actually are, and (not surprising for a journalist) writes with an engaging style. Before reading, I thought that the book might seem dated, since football has changed a bit over the last two decades, but I didn't find it to be that way at all. Many of the issues such as rookie vs. veteran salaries, long-term impact on health of football, and rule changes are still being discussed today. I found a description of a running back's collision with the goal post in the end zone (he bounced back about four yards and then ran back to the end zone, to give you an idea of how hard he hit it) especially relevant to today's discussion about the short and long term effects of head injuries. With the Lions' recent upswing in league success, it was also fun to read about the team from an historical perspective. I'd recommend this book to anyone interested in an inside look at the NFL.

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### **Bob says**

I am an asshole. No really. I'm a total jerk-and-a-half. Look, trust me. I know what I'm talking about here. I checked this book out from the Berkeley Public Library about a year ago, and then left it on the BART train during my commute home. Berkeley Public has gone ahead and billed me for it too, but of course, I haven't paid them yet. Sure, I've meant to; and I did take a trip to the BART lost-and-found to see if it turned up there, but as far as actually mailing in a check. Naw. Didn't do that. What's the total worst thing about this is that the version I checked out was an original first edition hardcover, which now it's lost forever on the rails.

I can only hope that whomever snagged the thing instead of returning it to the library has actually bothered to read effete journalist George Plimpton's account getting the living snot tackled out of him in the Detroit Lions training camp. What's most striking about this book is how much big sports in America has changed from the still-working class feel of a Lions training camp held at a boarding school with players crammed into narrow dorm rooms. Where today's barons of industry pride themselves on their season tickets and Superbowl seats, Plimpton serves to report on the then rough-hewn world of sport for astonished Northeastern bluebloods of his time.

Before you dismiss this review as the work of a scofflaw who only got through 167 pages of it before losing it on the train, I had read this book once before. It was a beat-up, old paperback with Alan Alda in a Lions uniform, kneeling and looking all sensitive. Alda whined his way through a movie version of the book that I tried to watch on "Movies 'Til Dawn" a couple of times. The real Plimpton has a kind of playful awe at getting his bones crushed by 250 pounds of Dick "Night Train" Lane that Alda just doesn't capture with his more emo approach to the material.

Wrapping this all up, I just found out that Berkeley Public has a copy of James Baldwin's "The Devil Finds Work," a book I'm dying to read. I guess it's finally time go and pay that fine.

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### **Kellee says**

Read this book if you want some insider info on what American football was like in the 1960's. It's got great stories, written succinctly in journalist style. George Plimpton is a lot like another author I like, A.J. Jacobs. They both undertake interesting challenges, like Jacobs' *A Year of Living Biblically* or *The Know-It-All*. In this book, Plimpton tries his hand at quarterbacking, and tries to cram the one hundred plays, the footwork, plus what his teammates are doing into his head. He writes about rookie initiation night and the hassling, different types of coaches, injuries, and life after the game. Plimpton namedrops great players and coaches like Bobby Layne, Night Train Lane, Jim Brown, Paul Brown, Dick LeBeau, etc. The book is really about how football inspires such loyalty and how the players played, not for the money, but for the camaraderie and the teamwork. A fun read for a football fan, even a novice one.

#### Quotes:

"Well, one of the nicknames for him is Tippy-Toes – hard to believe, I mean fellow standing still looks like he's sunk in the ground. But then he takes one step and you can spot that he's all springs and coils inside." Pietrosante on Alex Karras (page 181)

"That's a good number you're wearing," Williams said. "Johnny Olszewski's - Johnny O's." "It indicates my talent," I said." (page 218)

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### **Laine The Librarian says**

Everyone has heard of George Plimpton.....that is if you read the articles in the sports sections...knows that George Plimpton enjoys getting hit, thrown, punched or kicked around if it's dealing in sports he is in the middle of it. (Maybe you know George Plimpton by his daughter who played Stef girl with the glasses in the movie The Goonies.)

Now this time we will hear more of George Plimpton.

Especially if you follow the roster teams of Detroit Lions and see that there is a new Backup Quarterback.

George found the perfect article to write...about a Football player that is trying to get into the Detroit Lions team and what it's like day-by-day.

The hitch? Non of the other players KNOW that he is just a reporter...they think that he really is a football player that is trying out for it.

Until the word let out that all he is, is a reporter trying to get a story. That's when the gloves REALLY come off. George Plimpton shows you, literally shows you how getting into the football team, Detroit Lions really like.

Made into a Movie called Paper Lion made in 1968 starring Alan Alda as George Plimpton. Actual Detroit Lions players also appear in this movie as well.

If you love sports, or love the Detroit Lions (one wonders why: Washington Redskins and the Chicago Bears for me!!!!) then this is the book for you!!!

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### **Paul Schulzetenberg says**

Paper Lion is a throwback to the days of the NFL before the NFL-AFL merger. Plimpton takes us on a ride through training camp for an NFL player. The gimmick, of course, is that Plimpton has next to no skill at all in the game of football. This becomes evident quite early on when Plimpton writes candidly about the last time he played, which was in some high school pickup games. He disliked it then, and there's nothing about the game that really seems to grab his fancy. What Plimpton, and thus the reader, takes away from his training camp experience is an examination of the routine and interpersonal relationships. Plimpton portrays the athletes as nervous, sometimes callous, but usually jovial and welcoming. In short, the athletes become real people. It's a good read for an examination of team chemistry.

However, Plimpton's experience is becoming dated. Not only does this occur pre-merger, but Plimpton also writes in a "gee-whiz golly" style that has just a bit too much reverence for what he's examining. He will occasionally analyze the sport with a journalist's eye, but too often he becomes just another fan, just happy to be hanging out with the athletes. When Plimpton talks of the hangers-on around the Lions' practice facilities, it is hard to tell where Plimpton sees himself. Although he's wearing the jersey, he clearly empathizes more with the children catching passes than his fellow quarterbacks.

For football fans desperate for an image of training camp, this can get you your fix until the next game is on. For people looking for a more candid examination of sports and the role of athlete, I would suggest instead Jim Bouton's excellent Ball Four.

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### **Michael says**

Great fun.

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### **Brugge says**

This is the dream of every guy who thinks they could be a professional athlete, Plimpton gets to live the life of one for one preseason. As you can imagine, it is a lot of work and getting to live your dream isn't always the way you dreamed. The best parts of the book are Plimpton's writing ability to give the reader the feel of being part of the team instead of a fan. Obviously the real life characters who stand out stand out b/c of their larger than life personalities which allows Plimpton a chance to showcase his writing ability. Any NFL fan or NFL historian should read this book b/c the NFL wasn't always the cash cow that it is today, back in the 1950s they guys played football b/c they loved it and although it was good money it wasn't the best money but it was probably the best opportunity for these guys to make money. It was just a different era for the NFL (an era that isn't coming back) and Plimpton captures it for us.

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### **Mike Barker says**

I got this book for my sports-nut son to read, or to have on hand when he needs a book for a school reading project. I read it to make sure it would be appropriate for him (7th grade). I feel like it was. It wasn't really my thing, but it was okay. I was struck by several things that have changed since it was published. George Plimpton as a sports-writer? Probably wouldn't happen today. I don't know about him all that much, but my sense is that this would be an odd juxtaposition in the context of modern sports writing. A pro team using a private school as a practice venue probably wouldn't happen today either. Matters of safety and equipment have vastly changed since Plimpton wrote this. Vastly. One might wonder at the latent or blatant misogyny and racism depicted in the book, as compared to what exists today and how much/little things have changed. The sense of football as a career and a sport seems to have evolved quite a bit over the course of time. My reading device couldn't handle the recorded material embedded in the digital version I read, so I missed out on that, though I don't think I missed all that much. It was a fine enough book, probably much more appreciated by sports enthusiasts than myself. I read plenty of reviews that called the book "formative" in one way or another for many readers. I hope my son will find it meaningful when he gets around to it.

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### **Stephanie says**

There is a reason this book is a classic. Plimpton's writing holds up well fifty years later. I grew up in Green Bay and my family contains many rabid football fans. His stories had me rolling with laughter. From forgetting his college fight song to wanting to run pass plays from the 1920's, Plimpton kept me turning pages. He covered everything from the varied personalities of the team and the sadness of being cut or career-ending injuries. I highly recommend this book for football fans and those who love them.

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