

# Pass It On®...

## We Are All Amateurs.

*George Plimpton made a name for himself by slipping into high-profile careers and writing about his madcap adventures — as an amateur.*

We are all participants in what Walt Whitman calls “the great play of life.” How we choose to participate is up to us. We can be casual observers or throw ourselves into life and enjoy not only the triumphs but also our foibles. No one embodied this truth more than one journalistic pioneer.

Writer, editor, actor and bon vivant George Plimpton was born in upper-class New England in 1927 and graduated from Harvard University and Cambridge in the United Kingdom. At an early age, he was drawn to literature and a life of experience.

“I suppose in a mild way there is a lesson to be learned for the young, or the young at heart — the gumption to get out and try one’s wings,” he wrote. And he did, pioneering what became known as participatory journalism. He believed getting the real story meant getting out of the press box and into the dugout, the huddle, the orchestra pit.

Gregarious and sporting a distinct accent culled from life among social elites, he threw himself into stories about football, baseball, boxing, hockey and even the competitive world of the New York Philharmonic. He went through training camp with the Detroit Lions of the NFL, taking reps as a backup quarterback. He took three snaps in a game, the first a memorable trip as he was backpedaling after the snap. He sparred for three rounds with Sugar Ray Robinson and played goalie for the Boston Bruins in a preseason game. Perhaps most nerve-wracking was his attempt as an aerialist in the circus, at which he failed terribly. In the New York Philharmonic as a percussionist, he mishit the gong and was rewarded with applause from legendary conductor Leonard Bernstein.

What we learn from Plimpton’s madcap miscues and triumphs of participation at his ego’s expense is that the ultimate victory is really just being a part of something, anything, that you can look back on and say: “I did that. I tried. I had fun. I hope you did, too.”

In a world where climbing to the top in every endeavor seems to be the only measure of success, taking a step back and simply participating in life is a great reward.

“I have never been convinced there’s anything inherently wrong in having fun,” he writes. And fun he had. After a stint in the military as a demolition expert, he became fascinated with fireworks. He often entertained family and friends with extravagant pyrotechnics, delighting them with his home-made creations. At one such affair, a rocket failed to launch and exploded, leaving a crater. It was just as entertaining as lighting up the sky.

For Plimpton, life was about the effort and the friendships he developed along the way. His wide circle included professional athletes, literary debutantes and Robert F. Kennedy.

“Football, as I’ve known it,” Plimpton wrote after his foray with the Detroit Lions, “has nothing to do with winning or losing — it’s something that comes from the heart.”

For all of us on the sidelines and in the stands, Plimpton gave us permission to trot out onto the field, to make friends, to take a few hits, to jump back up and enjoy the stories with people we’ve come to love.

**Just Participate...** [PassItOn.com](https://www.passiton.com)

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