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Inside the Ropes: Sportswriters Get Their Game On

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Many writers dream of swapping lives, at least for a little while, with their subjects. This is especially true in the sports field, where writers are surrounded by men and women who are admired for their athletic prowess. George Plimpton turned this genre into a cottage industry with full-length books about football (*Paper Lion*), baseball (*Out of My League*), and hockey (*Open Net*), among others. Most recently Stefan Fatsis published *A Few Seconds of Panic*, chronicling his experience playing for the Denver Broncos.

The contributors to *Inside the Ropes* have followed in Plimpton's footsteps, to a lesser extent, taking on a wide range of activities that work better in some cases than others.

The nearly forty stories reach into every corner of the sports world. All the "usual suspects" can be found within these pages and are handled by some of the best writers in the business. On the other hand, some topics stretch the definition of the word "sport": Grabbing fish barehanded? Shuffleboard? Fantasy baseball? Poker (which constitutes the largest essay in the collection)? Can they be compared with subjecting oneself to charging linebackers or large brawny men wearing twelve-ounce boxing gloves? Yet those who engage in or follow such relatively genteel activities will be fascinated to learn that it takes more than desire to succeed.

Several of these sports are individually demanding. Donald Katz writes about his participation in a marathon skating race in Holland (as well as the aforementioned fish-grabbing); Bill McKibben gives his take on cross-country skiing, while Dan Washburn raced dragon boats. Most of them would agree: this stuff isn't as easy as it looks from the distance and safety of the stands or living room. Injury and, perhaps worse, embarrassment are constant possibilities. For example, Tom Verducci, a baseball writer for *Sports Illustrated*, tried his hand as an umpire during a spring training game. The best advice he received? Don't rip your pants.

Most sportswriters—the Walter Mittys of journalism—herein present a mix of healthy curiosity about the games they cover and are humbled in the presence of those who perform them well. Some, however, could be accused of hubris, taking the attitude that they—with whatever amateur skills they might possess—can mix it up with the big boys (and girls).

RON KAPLAN (November 17, 2008)

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