A Few Seconds of Panic: A 5-Foot-8, 170-Pound, 43-Year-Old Sportswriter Plays in the NFL by Stefan Fatsis

Drawing on rare access to an NFL team's players, coaches and facilities, the author of The New York Times bestseller Word Freak trains to become a professional-caliber placekicker. As he sharpens his skills, he gains surprising insight into the daunting challenges—physical, psychological, and intellectual—that pro athletes must master.

In Word Freak, Stefan Fatsis infiltrated the insular world of competitive Scrabble® players, ultimately achieving “expert” status (comparable to a grandmaster ranking in chess). Now he infiltrates a strikingly different subculture—pro football. After more than a year spent working out with a strength coach and polishing his craft with a gurulike kicking coach, Fatsis
molded his fortyish body into one that could stand up—barely—to the rigors of NFL training. And over three months in 2006, he became a Denver Bronco. He trained with the team and lived with the players. He was given a locker and uniforms emblazoned with #9. He was expected to perform all the drills and regimens required of other kickers. He was unlike his teammates in some ways—most notably, his livelihood was not on the line as theirs was. But he became remarkably like them in many ways: He risked crippling injury just as they did, he endured the hazing that befalls all rookies, he gorged on 4,000 daily calories, he slogged through two-a-day practices in blistering heat. Not since George Plimpton’s stint as a Detroit Lion more than forty years ago has a writer tunneled so deeply into the NFL.

At first, the players tolerated Fatsis, or treated him like a mascot, but over time they began to think of him as one of them. And he began to think like one of them. Like the other Broncos—like all elite athletes—he learned to perfect a motion through thousands of repetitions, to play through pain, to silence the crowd’s roar, to banish self-doubt.

While Fatsis honed his mind and drove his body past exhaustion, he communed with every classic athletic type—the affable alpha male, the overpaid brat, the youthful phenom, the savvy veteran—and a welter of bracingly atypical players as well: a fullback who invokes Aristotle, a quarterback who embraces yoga, a tight end who takes creative writing classes in the off-season. Fatsis also witnessed the hidden machinery of a top-flight football franchise, from the God-is-in-the-details strategizing of legendary coach Mike Shanahan to the icy calculation with which the front office makes or breaks careers.

With wry candor and hard-won empathy, A Few Seconds of Panic unveils the mind of the modern pro athlete and the workings of a storied sports franchise as no book ever has before.

Personal Review: A Few Seconds of Panic: A 5-Foot-8, 170-Pound, 43-Year-Old Sportswriter Plays in the NFL by Stefan Fatsis
A few years ago, Stefan Fatsis set out to become a Scrabble champion. Now he is trying to be a player in the National Football League. In A Few Seconds of Panic, Fatsis sets out to be an active participant in a National Football League training camp. Given his physical size, athletic prowess and reconstructed knee, he sees the role of kicker as one that may work for him. Fatsis quotes Jason Elam, the Denver Broncos incumbent kicker
during that training camp, describing the role of kicker as "hours and hours of boredom surrounded by a few seconds of panic."

The book is far from boring. If you enjoyed Wordfreak, Fatsis' book on Scrabble, you will also enjoy this book. Even if you are not a football fan. When Fatsis is not competing at Scrabble or football, Fatsis is a sports writer for the Wall Street Journal.

Fatsis convinces the National Football League to let him join a team in training camp as long as he can find a team willing to let him in. This is not an easy task in the very controlling NFL. He finally convinces the Denver Broncos to let him participate in training camp. Fatsis participates in training camp and even suits up for a pre-season game against the Detroit Lions. Although the NFL refuses to allow him to participate in the game.

Fatsis tries to make some comparisons between football and Scrabble:

Both great football players and great Scrabble players say that when they're in the proverbial zone, the game decelerates and the instantly see the answer. I, for one, think that's easier to accomplish without the continual threat of being steamrolled by a charging goliath, which is not a major concern in Scrabble.

A Few Seconds of Panic is full of insight to the psyche of a football and football players. It is a great exploration of the psychology of competitive athletes.

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