

MY UNNECESSARY NOVEL

By Kris Durham

In 2012, when I first arrived in Detroit, I received a gift from my former college roommate and the starting quarterback, Matthew Stafford. The gift, a book by John Grisham called *Playing for Pizza*. The book is about a quarterback for the NFL's Cleveland Browns, Rick Dockery, and his journey from the NFL sidelines to finding himself a member of the Parma Panthers. Something I can very well relate to.

Despite our differences in position and exit from the NFL, reading about Rick's journey sparked an interest in me that I never saw coming nor did I ever imagine my life would soon have the same landing spot as Rick. I had even joked with Matthew and another one of our college and professional teammates, Shaun Chapas, that after our playing careers were finished we should all go to Italy to play together again. But never in my wildest of dreams did I think that playing in Parma would come true.

Fast forward a few years after I had finished *Playing for Pizza*, I had just been released from the Oakland Raiders, and I decided that I would retire from football if I didn't sign a contract before the end of the year. The season came and went without me receiving a contract offer. Now was the moment of truth, do I move on or do I keep trying. To move on, I needed to force myself to get away from football, so I decided to travel through Europe by myself for a few months in early 2016.

It's funny how life and destiny work sometimes because I had not thought about Rick or Panthers of Parma in quite some time, years actually. But there I was traveling through all of best tourist traps that Italy has to offer, when I noticed that I had a random message on Facebook. The message was from Ugo Bonvicini and he wanted to know if I had any interest in playing football with the Parma Panthers. In my head, I thought that this couldn't be real, but interested I wanted to hear what he and head coach, Andrew Papoccia, had to say about football and life in Italy. So I took the call while I was standing outside of my hotel in Firenze. Honestly, I was very intrigued, but remembering why I was on this European vacation I decided to politely decline and told Coach Papoccia and Ugo to maybe try again next season.

After arriving back in the US, all I could think about was the conversation that I had with Papoccia. I started researching more information about the Italian American Football League and also, more about the city of Parma. I followed a few of the games online to check the Panthers standings as they were heading into the playoffs.

That same summer, I watched as many of my friends were back with teammates preparing for OTAs and mini-camps with their respective NFL teams. I felt the urge to play again, but even when I received a contract offer from a team in the Canadian Football League, I couldn't find the words to accept because in my head I was still ready to move on from the sport of football.

But again, destiny had other plans because a few weeks later I received another message from Ugo. He told me about how the Panthers season had ended early and how close they were to another championship. From then on, Ugo and Andrew had me on the hook, and finally after almost a year after the introduction message and nearly 4.5 years since reading *Playing for Pizza*, I committed to coming to Parma. I was going to be able strap on the pads with the Panthers.

"I can't promise you a lot, but I can promise that Parma will have the best food that you've had in your entire life." - Andrew Papoccia

I'm not sure if that's what sold me on coming here, but it definitely didn't hurt to have the best food in my life promised. The best part of that sales pitch is that Andrew wasn't lying. Parma has the best food I've ever had in my entire life. But the best part about coming to Parma was far from the food. In Italia, everything for me has been a new experience. Some things, I immediately love and want to bring back to the America with me. While others...not so much. But it's all part of the experience.

Like Rick in the book, when I arrived I was a little lost. I was in a foreign city with a foreign language that I was unprepared for. Luckily, most of the guys on the team spoke English and were willing to help me adapt and show Tony Bell and myself around the city. But still the change can be somewhat overwhelming in the beginning from the language to the simple observation that everything tends to be smaller. I mean really small. The cars, the showers, the homes, the beds, everything. To say it simply, Americans really do think bigger is better or as Carol, my girlfriend, says "Americanata"

Just as uncomfortable as I was when I first arrived, there was one place that I knew I would feel comfortable. That was on the field. I mean it's something I have done most my life and also as a profession so I should be able to get out there and show the guys a few things or so I thought. Then BAM. It happened. This was my nightmare. The one thing I didn't want to happen was to get injured while playing football in Italy. Yet, here I was injured in the first practice. Ugo immediately took care of me and had physical therapy set up and the best care I could have imagined. But I was still on the sidelines.

Having to sit and watch my team play actually made me appreciate the game and the guys more and more. The long bus rides after a big win, the guys would have chants and songs about everything. Any thing and everything was celebration and these guys did it all together. Even as I came back from my injury, the team seemed to be really coming together.

Unfortunately, our season came to an end earlier than we had hoped. Initially, I thought that my playing career was finished. I'm done. But once again, destiny has a way of finding her way back into your life.

After the season, I left Parma in July, but quickly returned by the end of August and played Flag Football with the guys. After I left again in September, I returned again in October and again in December. Before coming back for good in February of this year. There were a lot of reasons for my returns, but every time I do return to Parma, I do feel like I've never left. Like this is my 2nd home.

But coming to Parma to play American football was never about the game for me. It's about more than that. Here, in Italia, I have found a group of guys that have taken me in as a member of their family, and they reminded me of the reason I began playing the game so many years ago. I have found a second home in Parma, and a language that day by day seems to be getting easier to understand. And a family of brothers that support each other in every aspect of life. All in all, I found everything I didn't know I was searching for.