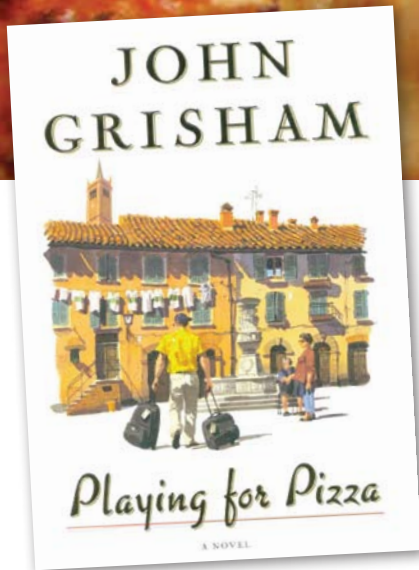




# Playing for *Pizza*

By Dave Cook



**Not only has Craig McIntyre read the novel *Playing for Pizza*, but he's also lived it. He's even in the book to prove it.**

The former Eastern Washington University football player ('01-'05) was one of the main sources famed author John Grisham used in his book about professional football in Italy. McIntyre, a 2001 graduate of Spokane's West Valley High School, has played the past two seasons for the book's real-life Parma Panthers in Parma, Italy.

"I couldn't believe it," said McIntyre of his first meeting in Italy with Grisham, whose long list of novels includes 11 that have been turned into movies, including blockbusters *The Firm*, *A Time to Kill* and *The Pelican Brief*.

"He wanted to keep it low key," explained McIntyre. "He didn't want to be in the limelight and in the media. But he's really big in Italy – *The Broker* is a big book there. *Bleachers* is a football book, so this is actually his second book about football. A lot of our players have read his books."

*Playing for Pizza* was released in September 2007, and is about a fallen American football star who can no longer get work in the National Football League. The player's agent, as a last resort, signs a deal for him to play for the Panthers. The quarterback's move to a small city in a foreign land leads to a series of cultural adventures.

Those adventures are based loosely on those of McIntyre and his teammates, most of whom are native Italians. An afterthought in soccer-crazed Europe, the Panthers play by American football rules but only are allowed a limited number of Americans on their roster. McIntyre was one of the team's five Americans in 2006 and one of just two this past season, in addition to a pair of American coaches.

The Americans on the team – easily the most experienced and talented players and the only ones to be paid a stipend and expenses – were the main sources for Grisham's research. The book's title is based on the fact the only pay for the native Italians comes in the form of team gatherings when the owner covers the cost of pizza and beverages – mostly wine



Craig McIntyre pictured with the author and some of his Panther teammates.

and beer, of course – for the players and their families.

"It's different on every team," said McIntyre of the pay structure for players. "But not one Italian on our team gets paid. A lot of them have families and work all day, then practice at night. At least once a week and after we win, the whole team goes out to a pizza joint. It's a big part of what the team is all about, and the owner picks up the tab."

What about when the team loses?

"We don't lose too often," laughed McIntyre. "We still get together – it's just not as festive. It's still a reason for everybody to get together and enjoy the good food and drink."

So is the book accurate? McIntyre thinks it is, although he says it somewhat sheepishly because of the gallivanting that is described in the book.



2007 Parma Panthers



"It's pretty right on," he said. "We've done a lot of what's in the book – I'm not going to lie. I always want to play my best and do my best, but I treat playing in Italy as a vacation. It's a pretty unreal experience for me."

McIntyre was in his first season as a Panther in 2006 when he heard that Grisham was considering writing a book about his team. At the time, Grisham had completed

*The Broker* and had learned of Italian football while doing research for that novel.

McIntyre and his American roommates were at home the night Grisham called and talked with American Ed Pricolo, who played collegiate football at Sacred Heart in Connecticut. Grisham's communications with the Americans were his greatest source of content for the book.

McIntyre said Grisham wrote the first half of the book and then came to Parma early in the 2007 season. By then, the five Americans the team was allowed were reduced to two – McIntyre and quarterback Mike Souza (formerly of Illinois State). The team's head coach (Andrew Papoccia) and defensive coordinator (Dan Milsten, formerly of the University of Washington) were also members of the team.

"He had dinner with us three or four times and ate with the whole team a couple of nights," McIntyre explained of Grisham's week-and-a-half visit. "He just picked our brains about our experiences there. He took notes and thanked us for our time."

Grisham returned to the United States and completed *Playing for Pizza*, then brought his family back to Italy for the Super Bowl. The book's "Author's Note," written on June 27, 2007, thanks McIntyre and his American teammates:

"Their coach is Andrew Papoccia, and his assistance was invaluable. Their quarterback Mike Souza, wide receiver Craig McIntyre and defensive coordinator Dan Milsten were extremely helpful. When it came to football, these Americans answered all my inquiries. When it came to food and wine, they were even more enthusiastic."

In September, about two weeks before the book was released, McIntyre received four copies directly from Grisham. In one, Grisham wrote "To Craig. Thanks for all your help. Go Panthers."

"It was a really good present," said McIntyre. "It's a quick and easy read. When it was released, I had to go to the mall to make sure it's up front and out there."

As he was reading *Playing for Pizza*, McIntyre couldn't help but see a little of himself in a confident, sometimes show-boating, Italian receiver named Fabrizio.

"I could see myself in some parts of some characters, including him," said McIntyre. "I was cocky – I admit it. I talk back and forth with opponents – that's something you can't do at Eastern. But over there it's allowed and I would say things that would get the other team fired up. It made the game fun for me. So that receiver could be me a little bit."

Depending on how many Americans the IFL decides teams can have on their rosters, McIntyre expects to return to Parma for the 2008 season. McIntyre said there is a chance that teams will only be able to retain one American, and he said that spot would most certainly be filled by a quarterback.

"Half of me wants to stay in Italy," the 24-year-old said. "I really like it over there and want to keep playing while I'm young. I consider my teammates my family too – a lot of them offered to take me in until I find a job."

Besides his playing career in Italy, he has fond memories away from the game during his short stints in the country. He has attended two of the biggest wine festivals in the world and visited some renowned wineries. But three other events stand out in particular, including his trip to Germany to visit with and watch his former quarterback at EWU, Erik Meyer, play in NFL Europe.

"This past year I stayed with Meyer in Cologne for about a week and it was a blast," he said of the now defunct league. "It was a great experience to see an NFL Europe game and see one of my best friends. The league lost lots of money but had good crowds. They had a good fan base and it's sad to see the league go."

"In my first year, Italy won the World Cup in soccer," he added. "Every game was a big party, and it was fun to be a part of that."

"And, of course, having John Grisham come to Parma was amazing."

McIntyre finished his student teaching in physical education in fall 2007 at Seth Woodward Elementary in Spokane, and helped coach a seventh/eighth grade combo football team at Centennial Middle School to an unbeaten season. Eventually he expects to become an elementary P.E. teacher and coach.

But first, he's living out a dream playing football and enjoying life in Italy. Just rubbing elbows with John Grisham has made him sort of a celebrity in his own hometown.

"One of my students brought the book and wanted me to sign it," he laughed. "Even a few aunts and uncles of mine. That's a little strange, but I'm more than happy to do it."

Not bad notoriety for a former Eagle playing for pizza. **E**