

## Going Face to Face with Broadcaster Roy Firestone

*On honoring Hank Aaron, performing and giving back*

BY RON MOSELEY

In baseball, the consummate player is known as a “Five Tool Player” – someone who can hit for average, hit with power, possess great speed, and field and throw well.

Based on his eclectic talents and accomplishments, the broadcasting equivalent of this player has to be Roy Firestone. He’s been in the game for the last 32 years, amassing over 5,000 interviews—and has been honored with seven Emmy Awards and seven Cable Ace Awards.

If you’ve watched sports anytime over the last three decades, Firestone has been hard to miss on the airwaves. He spent nearly a decade as sports anchor at KCBS (in the 70s and 80s) and was with ESPN for 22 years, host of *Up Close PrimeTime* and *Sports Look*.

Firestone also served as the Lakers post-game host in the mid-90’s, as well as AOL’s *Time Out With Roy Firestone*.

He even played himself in the feature film, *Jerry Maguire*.

Known as the “Don’t Make Me Cry Guy” for having brought such legends as Barry Bonds and Dennis Rodman (and many others) to emotional tears, Firestone was hired to make Cuba Gooding Jr.’s character, “Rod Tidwell,” cry after director Cameron Crowe set out looking for a “Roy Firestone” type—and ended up with the man himself.

“I’ve been called the Barbara Walters of sports because I’ve made so many people cry, but the truth is that I just want to get to their hearts, to find out who they are,” explained Firestone.

Currently, Firestone is the host of *Face To Face with Roy Firestone*, a sports talk show on HDNet, founded by Dallas Mavericks owner, Mark Cuban.

Not only relegated to sports, Firestone has interviewed a myriad of personalities ranging from Richard Nixon to Miles Davis, Elton John and James Stewart.

The late *Los Angeles Times* Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist Jim Murray called Firestone, “the best interviewer I’ve ever seen. That’s not the best inter-



viewer in sports, that’s the best interviewer period.”

What many people don’t know is that Firestone is also a performer.

Firestone’s live show, which consists of singing, comedy and versatile mimicry, with the aid of intricate sports bloopers and highlight reels, has seen him open for The Four Tops and Michael McDonald, among others.

A sought after entertainer on the corporate event circuit as well, Firestone fills rooms of 5000 and more, commanding standing ovations. He says he was honored to have sung the National Anthem at the Washington Redskins game September 11 last year.

“I’ve really been an entertainer since I was 13 and a singer since I was 16,” said Firestone, who has been performing professionally for 22 years. “But only in recent years have people come to know that

I’m a performer. They’ve really just known me as a talk show host. They don’t know that I do a show... it’s word of mouth and people are slowly getting it.”

Of Firestone, CNN’s Larry King says, “There’s nobody like him...he defines unique. He’s hysterical to the point of bringing you to mad laughter... he does the best impressions I’ve ever seen.”

But it’s his interview skills that will be on display when he talks to baseball legend Hank Aaron at a charity event on October 16 at the Omni Hotel in Los Angeles.

“It’s essentially an interview show, live, in front of a dinner,” Firestone said from the living room of his San Fernando Valley home.

The event is the 11th Annual WSA (West Coast Sports Associates) Roy Firestone Award Dinner, where they have honored many sports immortals in the past,

such as Wayne Gretzky, Jim Brown, Cal Ripken, Jr. and Arnold Palmer.

Aside from the cause, what makes this year's presentation special is that Hank Aaron makes very few public appearances, let alone grants interviews.

"(The charity) basically benefits young kids," said Firestone, whose WSA is teaming up with Aaron's Chasing The Dream Foundation this year.

"They're either kids who've been physically challenged, autistic kids and/or economically disadvantaged kids. We work with a great deal of the inner city and East L.A. circles, providing buses and taking kids to after school programs."

Firestone says that WSA has worked with many outreach programs, but most closely with *Prime Time Sports* in particular, because "they follow a very strong philosophy in giving back to the community."

"It's involving yourself daily, every single day," says Firestone. "It's giving (the kids) a place to go. Let them be productive athletically, let them see the improvement they can come up with academically. We have had amazing results and we're very proud of that."

For someone so closely associated with Los Angeles, it's interesting to note that Firestone is from Miami, Florida and is such an avid Baltimore Orioles fan that he has a room devoted to the team in his house.

The Orioles had their spring training facilities in Miami and it was the closest that a young Roy Firestone would get to a major league team at the time – literally.

"I had a chance to be the clubhouse boy (for the Orioles)," said Firestone of his introduction to professional sports. "You used to hear, back in the 30s and 40s that a kid would run away and join the circus. Well, I ran away and joined the baseball team. After school I'd ditch my books and run to the ball park during spring training and that's when it got in my blood."

Firestone's passionate respect and admiration for all things sports and performance are apparent as soon as you step into his home. Adorning the walls upon entrance are various framed Beatles posters and other memorabilia. These lead up to his study that houses the homage to the Baltimore Orioles.

Heading back down the stairs, a dis-

play case showcases autographed baseballs and footballs, along with a gaggle of miniature baseball stadiums. In the adjacent hallway are signed and mounted pictures and art from a diverse bunch—from Miles Davis to Willie Mays.

So when this man has a take or two on the world of sports, you regard it with a great deal of credence.

"I know you need to change with times," he said, "but I think sports has become like a strip mall. All of sports is like, 'how can we squeeze another dime out of this thing?' I went to Anaheim the other night and they were playing a movie trailer during the baseball game! How dare they do that?! I resent it when I go to the movies and I see an L.A. Times commercial. I want to see a movie. I want to see the ball game. I don't think they have the right to do that."

And the community-at-large does not escape his gaze either.

"I think that there is a restlessness," said Firestone. "There is a restlessness to celebrities everywhere in our society. It's not enough that people can do a song or a movie, they have to be out every night on T.V., and paparazzi being what it is, has to sort of revel in that... and it's the same thing with sports."

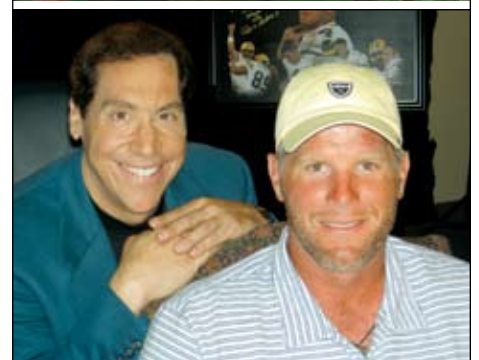
"I think the biggest celebrities are sport celebrities," he continued, "because they're on every week for 20 years. Your children see them and it's the one the last shared experiences in our lives. And that's why the athletic figure in sports is the biggest celebrity in the world."

When Firestone talks about his influences he says that he's always been attracted to the people who could do multiple things – kind of like that five-tool player.

"I like the five-tool guy," Firestone said. "I always liked the five-tool guy. I like the person who can do many, many things well."

But most important to Firestone is the concept of humility and giving back. "It may sound trite, but life is a gift... it's important to understand that and find a way to help others."

*For ticket information for the 11th Annual West Coast Sports Associates Roy Firestone Award Dinner honoring Hank Aaron on October 16 at the Omni Hotel, contact Catherine Shump at (310) 294-7179 or go to [www.westcoastsports.org](http://www.westcoastsports.org)*



(From top to bottom) Firestone at home; with Green Bay Packers Quarterback Brett Favre; interviewing Elton John; Performing the National Anthem before 80,000 at the Washington Redskins opening game September 11, 2005.