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He Has This Art Down to a Science

JIM MURRAY

Roy Firestone is the best interviewer I ever saw. That's not sports interviewer. That's interviewer, period. That includes Mike Wallace, Barbara Walters, Diane Sawyer, Morley Safer. Any or all of the above. Interviewing is a high and holy art. It is not the confrontational thrusting of a microphone under the lips of an accused as he steps out of his car at the office, it is not framing questions to show how clever you are. It is a tactic to elicit information, shed light on the personality of the interviewee. It calls for its practitioner to be adroit, curious, empathetic, multi-ranged in interests and sensitive. A good interviewer is one who makes his subject feel investigated, not exploited; given a forum, not a third degree.



There is not a superstar in sports who has not been on Firestone's "Up Close" show on ESPN. Some of the most delicate egos, some of the most controversial personalities, even some of the most reclusive, have consented to his scrutiny. Who would you like? Michael Jordan? Mike Tyson? Reggie Jackson? Mickey Mantle? Arthur Ashe? John McEnroe? They've all been there. Being on the Firestone show is like making Westminster Abbey. Everyone wants to be there. The phone rang one day in Firestone's office, and an unfamiliar voice came over. "Listen, did you ever have Mark Messier on your show?" Answered Roy: "No, I haven't. I'm not sure what kind of clamor there is to have Mark Messier on the show." "I'd really like to see him on your show. He should be (hockey) MVP, but he doesn't get enough publicity," the voice went on. "Wait a minute! Who the hell is this?" Firestone asked. "My name is Wayne," said the voice. "Wayne who?" demanded Firestone. "Gretzky," said the caller. Ordinarily, super athletes have to be brought kicking and screaming onto interview shows. They take a cab to get on Firestone's show... It's not a chore, it's an honor.

The trick to deft interviewing is not to hit the subject with the negative before he has had time to sit down. Some "tough guy" questioners never understand this. They like to contribute to their image by asking the unanswerable. Sort of "What did you do with the baby?" stuff. You never ask a guy who has just triple-bogeyed away the National Open, "Well, Chip, tell us about those out-of-bound shots on 18, eh?" Your reward for this kind of hitting the interviewee over the head with a mallet as he comes in the door is often that he will promptly unbutton his microphone and stalk off the set. Firestone's hard questions come coated in chocolate. But they're there.

Firestone has written a book (with Scott Ostler), "Up Close, and In Your Face With the Greats, Near Greats and Ingrates of Sports." It is a compendium of most of the things that have happened in sports in our half-century. Every major figure is there, often in a state of psychological undress, candid, sometimes off-guard but always real. What Firestone tries to do is elicit the qualities that make the athlete unique. He perceived immediately, for example, that while Magic Johnson was born for a spotlight, Michael Jordan considers himself a prisoner of his talent. On the court, he is Air Jordan. Off it, he is Where's Jordan? "Off the court," writes Firestone, "he is like a frightened deer caught in the headlights." He asks Jordan if he felt imprisoned by his fame. "Yeah," admits Jordan, "but I kind of put this on myself. Initially, when I got in the league, it was fun. But after a while, it gets old, and now it's just something I have to deal with." The notion that it's not that much fun being a national icon astonishes a lot of people. Not Firestone's listeners.

Roy tries not to be judgmental. He asks the questions, doesn't pass the sentence. He is neither politically correct nor politically incorrect. He tries to be politically just. But he can't help but be saddened when he sees, for instance, a Mike Tyson go from a shy, somewhat-introverted scholar of boxing to a confused but arrogant young man who curses at reporters at his news conferences, pretends to fall asleep and ridicules his opponents with homosexual taunts. "There was a sweetness and humbleness to him," writes Firestone. "Then, it started to unravel." Firestone asks Mike to explain. "Inside the ring," says Tyson earnestly, "you're in control. I'm totally in control of the situation. It's something you've prepared for, you've trained for, and it's like a diagram, everything is written out in your head." Outside the ring, Tyson tells him, it's chaos. "It's the unexpected, constantly. You don't know what's going to happen." Life doesn't fight fair. No Marquis of Queensbury there. Life hits on the break, gouges, holds. Tyson was overmatched, Firestone concludes.

Firestone was one of the first to perceive in the tennis player, John McEnroe, not the petulant, out-of-control, tantrum-throwing crybaby of the courts but an athlete who incorporated these immaturities into the act in order to be manipulative, coercive, intimidating and intense. Writes Firestone: "His act is more than an act, it's an essential part of his genius. He has to work himself into near-hysteria to play his best. That's McEnroe. He admitted to me that on the court he is his own worst enemy and needs to be." Not all of Firestone's subjects are mega-heroes. There is the pro basketball player (Bob Love), who went from a 17.6-points-per-night star for the (pre-Jordan) Chicago Bulls to a job as a busboy in a department-store dining room. Love's problem was a stutter. He used to dream, not of sinking two free throws to win a payoff game at the buzzer, but of standing in a room full of people and delivering a flawless address. "I grew up in a little town down south (Bastrop, La.)," he tells Firestone, "and during the time I was growing up, we didn't have no idea about speech therapy. My grandmother would try a lot of things like hitting me across the mouth with a dishrag. I used to dream of standing up in front of thousands of people, telling them about my life, and I would have their attention for 30 minutes or an hour." The dream came true. Love got to put away his apron and became the department-store chain's director of health. It's the kind of story Firestone likes to tell best. Here's Mickey Mantle, not rounding third and heading for home to a standing ovation in a Yankee Stadium World Series, but at a crossroads in his career in a Kansas City hotel room just after he has gone hitless in 22 consecutive times at bat, phoning his father between sobs. His father drives up from Commerce, Okla., Mickey relates, shows up at the hotel room, grabs a suitcase and begins to pack. "What are you doin'?" asks Mickey. "Well" his father says, "I'm taking you home. You can go to work in the mines with me." Mickey got the message.

Firestone's life—and book—are full of episodes like that. Real life through a prism of sports, questions you wanted, adroitly asked, honestly answered.

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