



My Friend Roy

The Barbara Walters of Sports

By Lawrence Grobel



Firestone bought this baseball, signed by Babe Ruth, at a charity auction. Its value has gone up considerably. Photo © Rose Eichenbaum

I have to take credit for getting my friend Roy Firestone to take advantage of his close proximity to professional athletes and other celebrated people. For years, when Roy lived next door to me, he would go off to interview Mickey Mantle or Muhammad Ali or John McEnroe for ESPN then come back and tell me about it. I would say, “Did you get them to sign something?” And he would respond, “No, I can’t do that. I feel funny. Like a fan, not a professional.”

“Big mistake Roy,” I’d tell him. “They don’t care if they sign one more thing. And you’re not just a fan, you’re talking to them on camera, they’re sharing intimate moments with you, you’re making some of them cry, for goodness sake. So what if, at the end, you pull out a baseball or a boxing glove and ask for a signature. And you should also pull out a camera and get a picture with them.”

“When did you start doing that?”

I, too, was reluctant to get people I interviewed to sign things. For the first 10 years of interviewing people like Lucille Ball, Linus Pauling, Ray Bradbury, Cher, Tony Bennett, Jane Fonda, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and Mae West, I never asked. So I understood Firestone’s position. But then I started to think: what the hell, I’m with these people, what’s the big deal if I have a picture taken with them or if I ask for a signature? Swallow whatever pride you have and just go for it. So I did, and I don’t regret the memorabilia I’ve collected since.

When Roy had kids, he saw the light. He came around to asking for photos and autographs by using them for charity auctions, and for keeping signed jerseys, footballs, basketballs, baseballs, bats, hockey sticks, boxing gloves, etc. for each kid. His boys are now 13 and 16, so you can imagine how much memorabilia is framed on his walls and under glass on his

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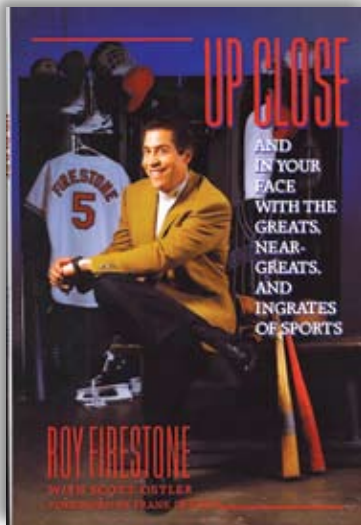
shelves. He has even designated one room in his house for his great passion outside sports: the Beatles. He's got books, bobbleheads, albums and dozens of signed photographs of the Fab Four. He's met with Paul McCartney numerous times, and is a walking encyclopedia of Beatles lore.

But getting things signed is still something he feels uncomfortable with, since his primary reason to see famous athletes is to interview them—originally for ESPN (he created the *Up Close and Personal* show, which is also the title to his first book) and now for AOL. The late Pulitzer Prize-winning sports columnist Jim Murray once began his column in the *L.A. Times* by point-blank stating: “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.” *Washington Post* columnist Tom Boswell added another name to the comparisons, noting that Firestone is to sports what Ted Koppel is to politics. *Sports Illustrated* dubbed him “the best interviewer in the business.” Cuba Gooding Jr. broke down under his questioning in *Jerry Maguire*. And Larry King and Howard Stern lost out to him as Firestone picked up his seventh Ace Award in 1996 (he’s also won six Emmys.) Which makes one wonder why he’s no longer seen on ESPN.

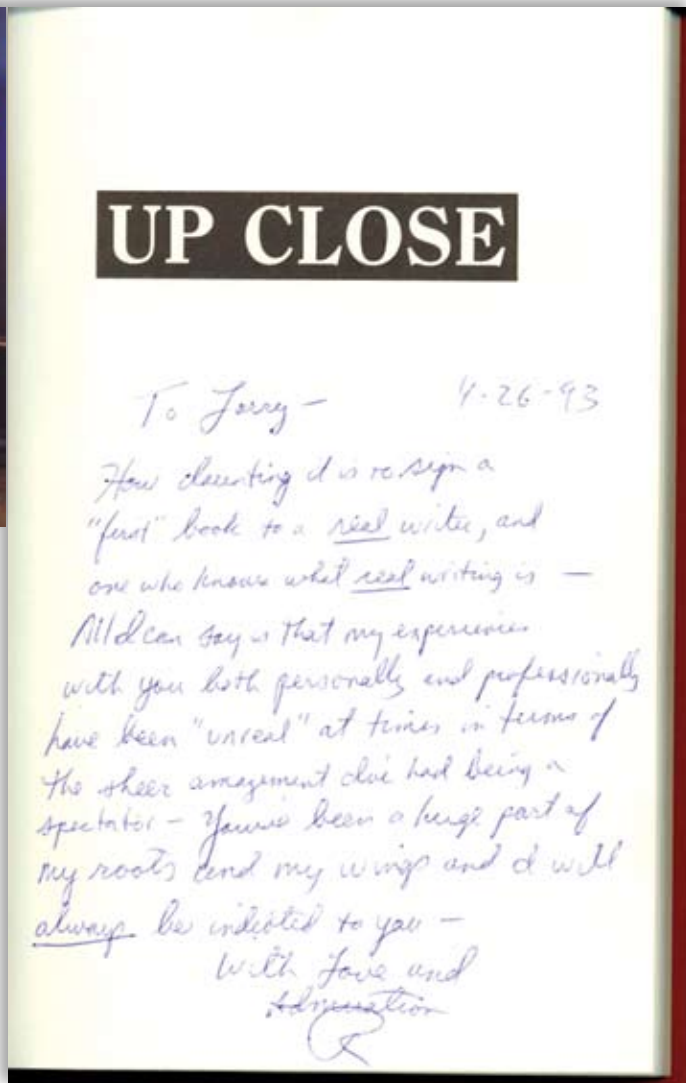
“I look at ESPN as a place where the maverick doesn’t last very long,” he says. “ESPN, ABC, Disney are companies who like their employees to follow their marching orders. They’re entitled to feel that way. I feel I delivered for them, but I’ve never been a company guy. ESPN was and remains conservative and blue collar in their style and approach. I don’t think ESPN found what I was doing necessarily compelling—when I would talk about race relations on a continuous basis. When you start getting people telling you how to do something after you’ve

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done it for 10 years and they’ve never done it before, telling you how to phrase a question or how to conduct an interview—you start to wonder where the criticism is coming from. After Magic Johnson disclosed that he was HIV positive. I asked him, ‘When you look in your son’s eyes, what do you see?’ That’s an abstract question, it’s asking a guest to create something. My producers took it right out. I asked why. One of them said, ‘It makes me sick to my stomach because it’s such a touchy-feely question.’ I said, ‘Maybe for you it is, but that’s your judgment of what I as an interviewer am entitled to paint on my canvas.’ I love the idea of asking the abstraction. Of asking Doug Flutie about his



Roy's first book was published by Hyperion in 1993. He has just completed his second book, which will be out in the fall.



Firestone wrote this heartfelt inscription to Grobel. They still marvel at how they met as next-door neighbors, both of them interviewers, and both then married to Japanese women. Roy's since moved, but the two are still close and often critique each other's works.

autistic child: ‘How can he tell he’s loved?’ The show was good because I really was interested, asking questions I wanted to know the answers to. But they started to tell me, ‘We need to hear more ball and less philosophical or sociological questions.’ I was disappointed that they didn’t understand that there was something special about the daily show.”

Where does Firestone rank himself among TV sports interviewers?

“There are very few good interviewers in sports. Bob Costas is the very best. I think I’m in the same heat. Most people have this perfunctory approach; they fall into ‘How are you feeling now? You must feel great.’ Most sports interviewers are very matter-of-fact. That’s never been interesting to me. I’m not interested in the technique of an athlete. I’m interested in the roads they have traveled to get where they are. I try to find the crossroads, the turmoil, the strangeness, the vagaries, the nooks and crannies of people’s lives. How people carry themselves in a room, how they approach what they do. I’m interested in weakness instead of strength, I’m fascinated by obsessions, about race relations and how we get along as people.

“A lot of the critics don’t see the human side of what I do, but my heart is what drives my interviews. I think I get to the heart of the individual. Sugar Ray Leonard talking about infidelity, Lyle Alzado talking about his impending death, Wade Boggs talking about his mother’s passing, Arthur Ashe about the love he had for his daughter. I’m also interested in the rapport between parents and children: Frank Barkley talking about his son Charles; Magic talking about his father. I’ve been called the Barbara Walters of sports because so many athletes have shed tears on my show. One year I interviewed 65 athletes and one out of every four cried. Mickey Mantle, George Brett, Magic Johnson, Dennis Rodman about his little girl, Emmett Smith about the paraplegic grandmother who raised him. It’s mostly about family, but isn’t that ultimately what you want to know about an athlete, what makes him tick? One of the most profound lines was the simplest ever delivered on our show, when Washington Bullets coach Wes Unseld said, ‘The best thing my father ever did was love my mother.’ That got me. It’s certainly not a Mike Wallace or Larry King approach. It’s just different.”

What many people don’t know about Roy is that he makes less than half his income as an interviewer. He lives a completely other life—as a performer. He’s appeared as himself in dozens of films and TV shows. He was the voice of the game announcer on the *Mighty Ducks* cartoon series. He’s done six skits with Jay Leno on *The Tonight Show*. He’s appeared as a guest on Bill Maher’s *Politically Incorrect*. And he has his own act which he takes on the road.

“I’ve been a mimic since I was 10,” he laughs. “I did John F. Kennedy in the fifth grade. Performed the equivalent of the Borscht Belt—Miami Beach—when I was a kid for \$20 a week. I put it on ice when I became a sports broadcaster but decided to resurrect it when I came to Los Angeles. I definitely have a dual life: one day I’m interviewing Brett Favre, the next I’m performing in front of 5,000 people. People say I can’t be a journalist and also a performer but if you keep both lines clear and defined, sure you can.”

To ESPN and now AOL sports enthusiasts, Firestone is that

Below: The print interviewer and the TV interviewer are all smiles in this 1994 shot taken at Grobel’s home.



“My heart is what drives my interviews.”

guy who talks to the athletes. But to top executives at corporations like AT&T, Xerox, IBM, Pepsi, GM and dozens of others, he’s the talent spotlighted on a stage before dinner is served and performs for them for an hour and a half. Sixty to 70 nights a year he stands alone, opening with a blues tribute called “Steamroller” with a montage of athletes doing their thing on a screen behind him. His voice is surprising, right from the start you are taken aback—this is not just a talented interviewer moonlighting as a wannabe performer, this is a guy who has sweated for years in isolation, perfecting his voice, his timing, his routines, so he can come out and be worthy of the five-figure paychecks he receives for each of these corporate shows. And after building up a clientele of corporate sponsors, he was discovered by Las Vegas and wound up headlining there. He was asked to host sports roasts and once shared the dais with Frank Sinatra at a black tie, \$1,000-a-plate dinner for Tommy Lasorda.



Larry and Roy have been friends since the early ‘80s, when Firestone moved next door to Grobel.

A question Firestone has often found effective is a simple one, just four words: what have you learned? When I ask him the question, Firestone reflects on the lives of others to find answers for himself.

“I’ve learned that, to use the ultimate sports cliché, it ain’t over ‘til it’s over. Just look at Bob Love of the Chicago Bulls, who had a severe stuttering problem and became a homeless person, he came back. Look at the late Lionel Aldridge, who was a manic depressive after playing on a Super Bowl championship team and was also virtually homeless, he got back on his feet. Look at Gail Devers and what she was able to do on the track at the Olympics after what she went through with Grave’s disease.

“Look at Bobby Czyz, who saw his father commit suicide right in front of him and was able to summon up whatever it took to become a champion again. Deprivation is what fuels the fire in an athlete. I asked Brett Butler after he found out he had cancer and had to leave the Dodgers how he mastered fear and he answered, ‘By taking the posture of a child and being totally trusting. As my child would jump from the top of the stairs into my arms because he trusts me inherently, I have to trust God that He’s going to make everything right.’ I’ve learned that no matter how adverse the situation or how troubling, how dark it seems, every one of these people at some point have had a crossroads and they’ve been able to persevere. Personally, I got fired when I was 22 and thought it was over for me professionally. But I’ve always used sports metaphors. For me, they’re real. Sports build character.”

LAWRENCE GROBEL is a freelance writer and a contributing editor at *Playboy* and at *Movieline’s* Hollywood Life. He has written eight books, including *Conversations with Capote*, *Conversations with Brando*, *The Hustons*, and *The Art of the Interview*, a subject he teaches at UCLA. He co-wrote Montel Williams’s *Climbing Higher*, which was a N.Y. Times bestseller. His next book will be on Al Pacino. His website is www.lawrencegrobel.com.

