

Sports television's most compelling interviewer helped to show fans what makes athletes tick—and tear up. Now the sound bite has drowned him out, and that's a crying shame



Roy Firestone

BY LEE JENKINS / Photograph by PETER READ MILLER

This time Roy Firestone is the one trying not to cry. He is sitting on a sofa in his home in Encino, Calif., watching the tape of an interview he did with Magic Johnson 16 years ago. In the clip Johnson is talking about a day he spent with children suffering from HIV, including a young girl who told him, “I want people to know we’re normal.” The girl was crying when she said it, which of course made Johnson cry, which in turn made everyone with him cry. And now, all these years later, here

is Firestone—who cried only once on-set in his entire career, when he interviewed a blind Negro league baseball player in the wake of the L.A. riots—also blinking back tears.

“You don’t get this in a postgame locker room or a sound bite or a two-minute ‘conversation,’ ” Firestone says. “You just don’t.”

Tear-jerking was his trademark, thanks largely to a fictional wide receiver for the Arizona Cardinals named Rod Tidwell, who sobbed on his shoulder in the movie *Jerry Maguire*. In reality Firestone conducted approximately 5,000 interviews with athletes, and in only 25 of them did anybody cry. What they did do, with much more regularity, was share pieces of themselves not seen before or since.

Firestone arrived on most television sets in the early 1980s, when the American public was developing an appetite for information that went beyond box scores. He was to sports

what Barbara Walters was to entertainment, and his 30-minute interview show on ESPN, *Up Close*, was the place athletes went to laugh, reflect, opine—and, yeah, sometimes cry. As Mike Tyson once told Firestone, “This is the only place where I feel comfortable talking about myself.”

Firestone developed an ease with major sports figures when he was still in high school, working as the Baltimore Orioles’ spring-training bat boy in Miami. He became a local sports-caster in Miami, and in 1979 a fledgling ESPN hired him to host a talk show called *Sports Hot Line*. Firestone interviewed a mime, a lion tamer—just about anybody who would give him 30 minutes. He flew to New York for the U.S. Open, set up two chairs in the parking lot at Flushing Meadows and tried to corral players as they walked to their cars. “You’ve got a lot of balls doing this,” John McEnroe told him back then.



GEORGE ROSE/GETTY IMAGES

“Ask me anything you want.” Firestone moved to USA Network in 1980, where the show was called *Sports Look*, and returned to ESPN four years later, when *Up Close* was born. “I wanted a show,” says Firestone, “that made you feel who these people were.”

The studio was in Los Angeles, at the corner of Hollywood and Vine, two chairs in an empty room, gray carpet on the walls. Firestone prepared by reading feature stories about his subjects at the UCLA library. He wore no earpiece and used no satellite feed. He made it seem as though he were grabbing All-Stars off the street and pulling them into his man cave. Only they did not see it as an obligation but an honor. Kobe Bryant once waited three hours for his segment after a storm blew out the

PERFECT HOST
Firestone won seven Emmys—largely because he insisted that the guest, not the interviewer, should be the star.

lights on set. Arthur Ashe went for an interview as he was dying of AIDS, and when Firestone had to tell him that his camera crew was stuck in an airport, Ashe simply said he would come back the next day.

“He made you feel like you were at home having a conversation with your best friend,” says Bill Walton. “You forgot you were being taped.”

Firestone and ESPN grew together, *Up Close* airing at 5:30 p.m. EDT, leading into *SportsCenter* at six. “He was one of the first stars of the network,” says Norby Williamson, ESPN’s executive senior vice president of studio and event production. “You can’t say enough about what he did for the franchise.” But unlike Chris Berman and Bob

Ley, other ESPN pioneers still plying their trade, Firestone, 56, is traveling the country giving speeches at corporate events. He does impressions of players. He tells stories about his show. He has even recorded a jazz album, called *Another Voice*. Business is thriving, yet he says, "I would put it all away for another shot."

He was a creation of the explosion in sports media and a casualty of it. While in the '80s fans were still being introduced to players as people, by the mid-'90s there was a sense we knew it all. "Back in those early days you had the ability to uncover them," says Williamson. "Now there is so much information. Everybody knows everything about everybody." That Firestone wants a show and does not have one is less a statement about him than about the industry. Despite the overwhelming demand for access to athletes, no long-form sports interview show exists anymore.

"There is the assumption that the audience's attention span today is very limited," says Bob Costas. "Roy would ask, 'What makes you tick? What makes you think that way? What do you look back on with regret? Take your time. Tell your story.'" For Firestone, it was always the subject's story that mattered, not the interviewer's voice. "I was never comfortable being the star," he says. "I wanted the guest to be the star."

Firestone's style is prone to parody, even by his biggest fans. "You're a boy, sitting at home, waiting for your father to come home, and he doesn't," mimics Steve Edwards, host of the Fox morning show *Good Day L.A.* and one of Firestone's closest friends. "Then you grow up, you win gold at the Olympics, and when you look out at the stadium, there is an empty seat, and that seat is your father's."

The cadence was slow, the body language theatrical, the questions earnest. Irony and sarcasm, hallmarks of modern media, were not part of his repertoire. Sometimes it didn't work, like when he asked Pete Rose what kind of woman he would be, and Rose said an ugly one. But more often it did, as when he told Mickey Mantle, "There wasn't a lot of hugging in the Mantle family. It wasn't part of your history, Mick," and

Mantle responded with an unforgettable reminiscence about writing his father a letter from Room 202 of the Betty Ford Clinic while he was being treated for alcoholism.

ESPN executives eventually became weary of the sentimentality on the show and asked him to pursue less touchy-feely lines of questioning. In 1994 Firestone surrendered the *Up Close* chair to Chris Meyers, followed by Gary Miller and Chris Connelly. "It was not the same," Williamson admits. Firestone hosted one-hour specials for ESPN every couple of

for intimate details about athletes. Likewise, athletes are more sheltered than ever, but they remain keen for a platform from which they can tell their story in context. Talking to a black screen for two minutes, from a thousand miles away, and then having their quotes parsed for sound bites, might make them receptive to 30-minute confessionals.

"More than ever," Firestone says, "athletes are looking for a place to share their souls."

For now, sports television's most probing interviewer will keep flying to his corporate

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ONE-ON-ONE Firestone read up for each of his 5,000 interviews, including his sit-down with Bob Knight, right, in 2000.

months and left in 2001. He did interview shows for AOL and HDNet but has not been on-air in more than two years, despite the fact that he won seven Emmy Awards and legendary *Los Angeles Times* sports columnist Jim Murray called him "the best interviewer I ever saw."

Firestone is often dismissed for going soft, though he was asking Sammy Sosa about performance-enhancing drugs in 1998 and Barry Bonds soon after. Should he get another show, he wants his first interview to be with O.J. Simpson in jail, so he can start off: "Why did you ruin your life?"

ESPN Classic still airs *Up Close*, and viewers clog Firestone's website with letters asking when and where he will return. He does not know what to tell them. Granted, fans are more informed than ever, but they remain hungry

speaking engagements while fellow travelers shout at him in airports, "Don't make me cry, Roy." The line became the title of his autobiography, but he has mixed feelings about it, and not just because it is based mostly on a myth. The tears trivialize the wide range of emotions he elicited.

Firestone still ingests a steady diet of sports television from his home, which feels like a Hall of Fame tucked away on a cul-de-sac.

Framed jerseys cover the walls, 54 miniature stadiums rest in bookcases, and 16 Baltimore Orioles pennants hang in the living room, a tribute to Firestone's favorite team. He is divorced with two sons: Andy, 20, a student at the University of Miami, Firestone's alma mater; and Nicky, 17, a defensive back and point guard at nearby Harvard Westlake School.

Williamson says Firestone's influence can be seen all over ESPN today, in the popularity of the daytime programming, the way reporters conduct interviews and the long-form storytelling on shows such as *Outside the Lines*. Those shows feature investigative pieces, but they also include human-interest stories, about athletes and their backgrounds. Those stories are trying to do exactly the same thing that Firestone was accused of doing so many years ago.

Make you cry. □