

Memorabilia

New company making autographs disappear

A new – and possibly controversial – service can remove autographs from baseballs

BY SCOTT KELNHOFER

In an age when providing collectors with autographs has become a major business enterprise, a California businessman has developed a process that he hopes becomes a commercial success by making autographs disappear.

Alan Berman has developed a process that can remove autographs and inscriptions from baseballs, offering collectors the opportunity to transform items with multiple signatures or inscriptions into more desirable, single-signed items.

Berman is the founder of Signed Baseball Magic, a company based in Santa Rosa, Calif. He began collecting autographed baseballs in 1990 and had amassed a collection of several hundred items.

He had hoped to add single-signed baseballs from great home run hitters like Babe Ruth or Jimmy Foxx to his collection, but said he was discouraged to see prices for such items soaring into the five-figure range.

In 2002, Berman was looking at one of his multi-signed baseballs that contained a Foxx signature and began wondering if it was possible to simply remove the other autographs. He consulted his daughter, Mary, who works in the field of art restoration, and asked her if she thought it would be possible to remove the unwanted signatures.

"It was a trial-and-error process, but the end result is that I was able to remove the four signatures and now have a beautiful Jimmy Foxx ball," Berman said. "I now own some baseballs that I never thought I would have. For collectors like myself, it means that baseballs that had been hard to come by and too expensive can now be more affordable."

Berman said his company's process is twofold – removing the signature or inscription, then restoring the surface of the baseball so there's no evidence of the previous writing. The desired signature is not touched or enhanced in any way.

Berman would not discuss the details of the process his company uses in the procedure, saying he didn't want to "divulge any trade secrets." But he did say the work his company does is as much art as it is science.

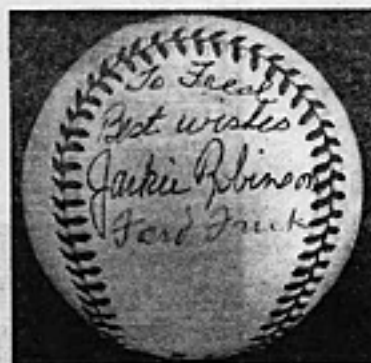
"Anyone can remove the signature," Berman said. "The hard part is the restoration of the surface, making it look like the signature was never there. When I first started with this idea, I was able to remove a signature from a ball but the surface was torn and damaged. I butchered it pretty good. My daughter was able to restore it to the point where,



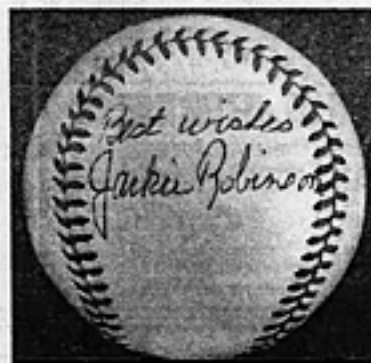
Before



After



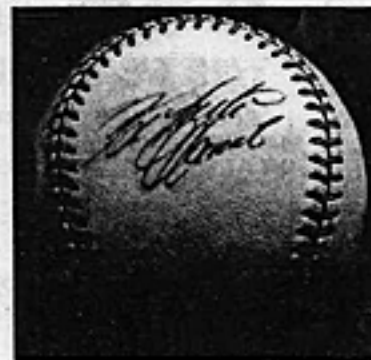
Before



After



Before



After

These before-and-after photos show the results of Signed Baseball Magic's new service to remove unwanted signatures and inscriptions from baseballs.

even though I know what I'm looking for, I can't tell any damage was done. It's a process that can't be hurried. You might work on an area of the ball for a couple of minutes, then have to wait several hours before you can do the next step."

Berman has a Web site – www.signedbaseball-magic.com – that includes before-and-after photos of balls that have had signatures or inscriptions removed. The cost of his service ranges from \$60 per word for inscription removal and \$125 per signature for the removal of 1-3 signatures, to \$75 per signature for the removal of 10 or more signatures from a ball. The turnaround time is a minimum of one week per baseball.

He also said the age of the ball does not affect the quality of the final results. "We've worked on base-

balls that are from the 1930s, and they've turned out just fine."

The service is relatively new (Berman just finished an order for his first retail customer in mid-September) but Berman believes business will grow at a steady rate.

"We recently ran our first ad in SCD and we had people calling within the first week," he said. "Once people see the quality of the work, I'm confident business will begin to build. I'm sure people will send in one ball at first to see how well it works and then they'll send in more. Hopefully, we'll start doing some shows in the next year to promote the service."

Inscription removal is likely to be the most requested service, Berman said.

Does Signed Baseball Magic offer any type of guarantee? "Customer satisfaction is our main goal," he said. "If we were to damage somebody's ball in any way, we're willing to buy it back at a fair price. That's just good business."

The Web site also features baseballs for sale that were once multi-signed items. For instance, a Gil Hodges single-signed baseball is available for \$1,400. It used to feature the signature of Hodges and the rest of the 1964 Washington Senators.

Berman understands that this new process will create some debate among hobbyists. Restoration is not frowned upon, but alterations are often deemed to be a form of deception.

Is what Berman doing deceptive?

"I asked that question to (authenticators) Jimmy Spence and Mike Gutierrez," Berman said. "They told me that as long as I was up front in telling people that an item used to be a team-signed ball, for instance, they were OK with it. For instance, the ball is labeled as formerly being a team-signed baseball."

"I've talked with some dealers and collectors about this and the reactions have been all across the board. But as an avid collector, I can greatly appreciate how treasured these items are. It's really a chance to take an item you already own and enhance it." ♦

Scott Kelnhofers is editor of Card Trade. Contact him by e-mail at scott.kelnhofers@fupubs.com.