

Autograph removal

A California company expands its services for signature removals

By Kevin Glew
Card Trade contributor

When Alan Berman unveiled his service to remove autographs from baseballs in September 2005, he knew it would be controversial. But the veteran collector admits that even he has been surprised by the fierce opposition expressed by some hobbyists.

"I found it very strange – like at the National, there's some people, some dealers that I've known for 15 years that won't even look at my stuff," Berman said. "They'll walk right by. They won't make eye contact with me."

But while universal acceptance has eluded him, the California-based enthusiast takes solace in the increasing number of collectors that have embraced his service.

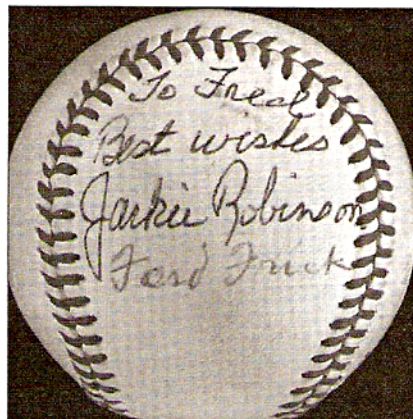
"I do get a lot of calls from customers who have been referred by some different dealers or some authenticators or what have you," he said. "I even got a call the other day and somebody told me they got my name from the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown."

These hobbyists have inspired Berman to expand into removing autographs from footballs, basketballs and sneakers. "We're doing a lot more than just baseballs these days," he said.

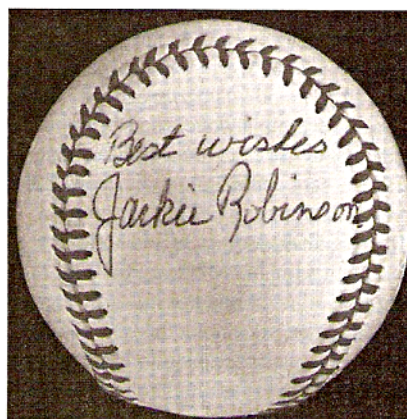
He's also erasing signatures and inscriptions from photos. "That came about because I've noticed that most actors and actresses personalize 8-by-10s," Berman said.

The fees (\$75 per word for inscriptions, \$80 to \$150 per autograph) for basketballs and footballs are the same as those for baseballs, while it's \$23 per word to remove inscriptions from photos.

Signature enhancement is another service Berman's company now provides. He says he often receives calls from people who have items with faded signatures. "We've had some success enhancing signatures," he said. Berman says the cost of this service depends on the autograph, but it's typically



Before



After

Signed Baseball Magic can remove signatures and inscriptions from baseballs and other items of memorabilia. But the service has a number of critics.

"about \$75 to \$150."

A passionate autographed ball collector himself, Berman got the idea for his business, Signed Baseball Magic (www.signedbaseballmagic.com), when he saw the prices of single-signed balls from immortals like Babe Ruth and Jimmie Foxx selling in the five-figure range.

"I don't have \$30,000 or \$50,000 to buy a baseball," he said.

In 2002, he was looking at one of his multi-signed balls that included a Foxx signature and wondered if the other autographs could be removed. With help from his daughter, Mary, an expert in the art restoration field, he established a process that removed the autograph and restored the surface of the ball.

"When I started this, what I had in mind was collectors like myself who would be able to have single-signed baseballs at a greatly reduced cost," he said.

When Berman sells a ball that signatures have been removed from, he provides this information in the item description. He emphasizes that he's not out to deceive anyone. In fact, before he launched his service, he solicited input from authenticators.

"They basically said, 'Hey, as long as you're upfront (about telling people that autographs have been removed), I have no

problem with it,'" he said.

Balls that Berman has worked on show-case staining under ultraviolet light, but they appear virtually flawless to the naked eye.

Despite his recent foray into other athletic gear, baseballs remain the bread and butter of his business. He has also started removing stains from balls.

"People send us these balls that have yellowed and spotted and we can greatly improve the overall appearance of the ball," he said.

Most of his business, however, is still removing inscriptions and autographs. Since his service began, he's received a variety of requests; many have involved removing signatures from team balls or multi-signed balls. In one case, a collector had a ball that boasted Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig signatures. The hobbyist took the ball to an authenticator and the Gehrig was deemed authentic, while the Ruth was labeled a forgery.

"We removed the Babe Ruth for him and now he's got a beautiful single-signed Lou Gehrig," he said.

Berman has also had cases where children have scribbled on valuable balls. "I get

calls where a guy will call up and say, 'My nephew was here for Thanksgiving and the little idiot wrote his name on my 1927 New York Yankees baseball. Can you get that off?'" he said.

He also fields inquiries from people who have balls signed by modern superstars. These people are usually taken aback by the cost of his service. Berman points out that he's the only person offering this service and that the process of removing an autograph and restoring the surface of an item is elaborate. "My daughter, who does the work, is nationally known as an art restorer. She gets stuff from museums all over the country, so she doesn't work cheap. And it's not easy to do this. If you're going to pay a couple hundred bucks to have a few autographs removed, you've got to have a ball that's worth it," he said.

So far, business has been steady, but sales haven't increased at the rate he would like. But Berman believes that he's starting to win over some of his critics. "I feel real good when someone calls and they've been referred by a dealer or one of the authenticators. I feel that maybe I'm becoming somewhat accepted," he said.

Berman, a certified financial planner, still considers Signed Baseball Magic a "hobby," but one day, he would like it to be a full-time business. "Obviously, I'd love to see it take off and have UPS drive up every day with a dozen balls," he said. "Hopefully, it will gain wider acceptance and the value of the balls we've worked on (will) go up, as compared to what's going on now," he said. ♦