

AutoGraphs

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Autograph removal service makes waves

Authenticator spots process with a UV light; company says that's fine with them

The newest process offering autograph removal from baseballs, which in theory results in a more collectible single-signed baseball, leaves a staining that is obvious under a black light. *Sports Collectors Digest*, with the help of autograph authenticator Richard Simon, examined the process and informed the company that offers the service of its discoveries. Company officials said that's fine with them because their product wasn't designed to deceive anybody anyway.

Simon "tested" the new company by having a forged Mickey Mantle autograph removed from a Lee McPhail baseball. With the naked eye, the baseball looks pretty good, though closer inspection shows that the leather in the "cleansed" area is much smoother than the leather on the rest of the baseball.

However, under an ultraviolet ("black") light, what seems like a chemical process leaves a dark purple staining. Simon said authenticators like himself should be checking single-signed baseballs for the staining and, when necessary, he will add language to his COAs along the lines of "evidence of signature removal can be seen on the side panel."

Upon getting his test ball back, Simon said he could see the surface looked different where the signature was removed. "The rest of the ball has a 'grainy' type of surface," he said. "The surface where the bogus signature was is extremely smooth when compared to the rest of the ball." Alan Berman of Signed Baseball Magic said this ball was signed with a newer pen that was difficult to remove and most of the balls that go through the process are vintage and don't inherit such a smooth panel.

Simon tested the company because he, like many other veteran hobbyists, doesn't like the concept of autograph removal. "I have serious reservations about removal of autographs on the ball and wanted to see if this guy's work was really good," Simon said. "I just don't believe anything should be altered; that's my major concern. I think this falls into that category. I don't think museums put up things that are altered. I think this has serious repercussions in the hobby."

"I know card guys can take nylon stockings and remove wax from a card. I don't think that's the same thing as this. I think removing dirt from something is different than what these people are doing. From now on, I will examine all baseballs under a UV light and will note it on the certificate if something has been removed."

Berman said the news that the process is evident under UV light should help the service avoid gaining a devious reputation.

"I have had several calls from the major auction houses, concerned that down the road, people would try to be deceptive," Berman said. "This lays their fears to rest. Personally, I don't know any collectors



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who keep their collection under ultraviolet light. What we've said all along is under the naked eye, or even under a magnifying glass, these things look great. We never tried to deceive anybody or say they were truly single-signed balls. Mr. Simon is of the opinion that what we're doing is bad. Quite frankly, I'm of a different opinion.

"In the last Lelands.com auction, a Jackie Robinson single-signed baseball went for \$14,000. I've got one on my website for \$4,000; I've removed four signatures from it. If you've got \$14,000, buy the truly single-signed ball. As a collector, I'm positively thrilled with the balls I'm able to obtain. In 15 years of collecting, I've never seen an Eppa Rixey single-signed ball available. Well, now I've got one — I removed four signatures from it."

But doesn't this service create the opportunity for confusion down the line, when a buyer might not find out the ball had signatures removed until an authenticator tells them?

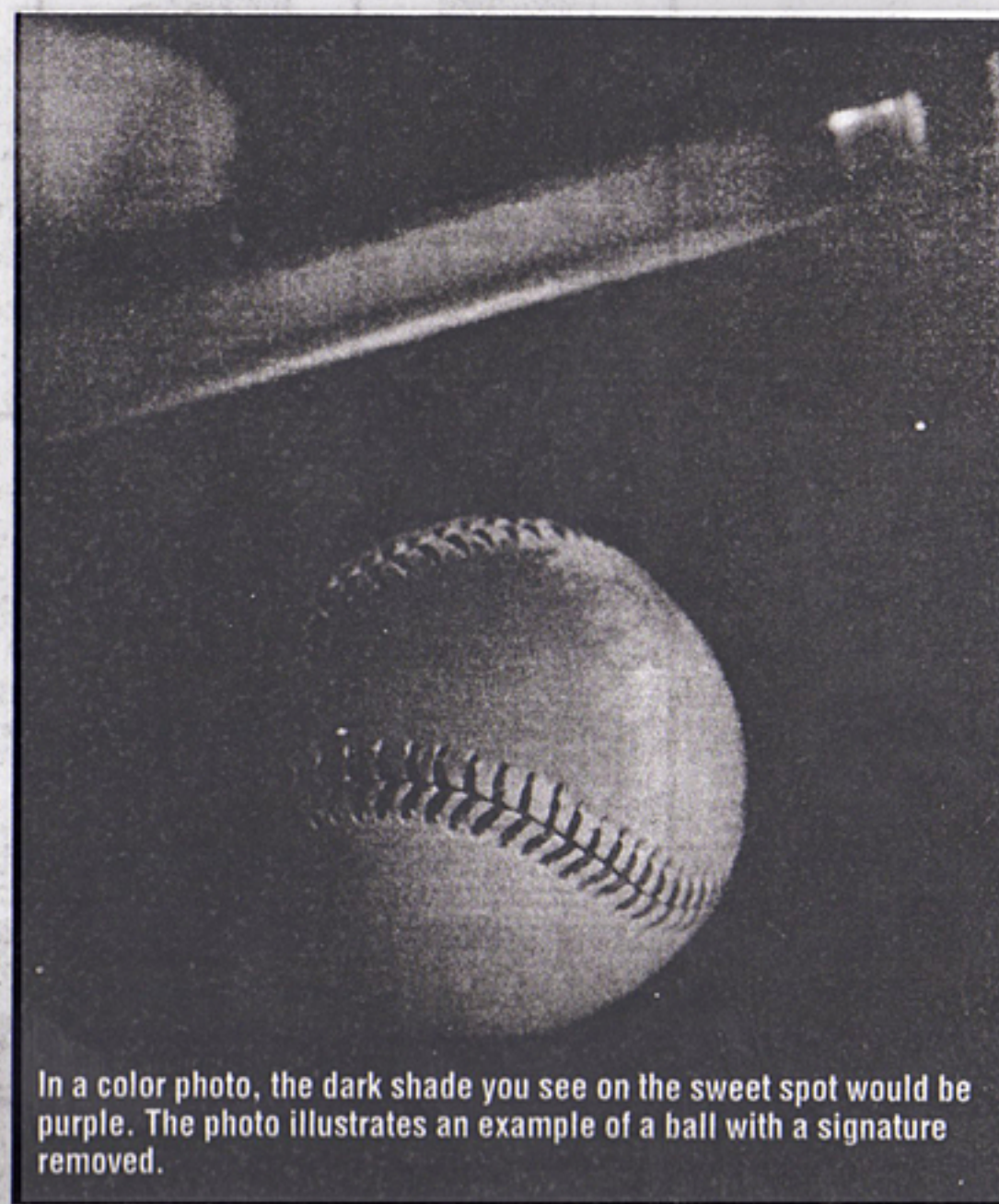
"I don't know; these balls are in my collection, and the ones I'm selling, they're advertised as exactly what they are," Berman said. "We say exactly how many signatures were removed. We're not trying to deceive anybody, and anybody who sent the ball to the authenticator would find out."

Noted authenticator James Spence said he believes there is the possibility of confusion years down the line, and he's seen it already.

"There are people on eBay that have a letter of mine that says, 'There have been removals from this baseball,' and they make the letter fuzzy, they sell the ball, and the guy winds up getting the letter and reading it and saying, 'That wasn't in your description,'" Spence said. "But you know what — it's caveat emptor to a certain degree. The collector has got to be more educated and skeptical. Educate yourself; that's part of the process, don't make the authenticator the villain down the road when you realize you didn't ask the proper questions."

Steve Grad of PSA/DNA and Spence provided authentication for several now-single-signed baseballs in the newest MastroNet.com auction catalog, and the LOAs and auction descriptions clearly state autographs have been removed from side panels. Spence said the process of autograph removal is not new. "There are a lot of people who do this type of work, but to my knowledge, they're not successful at getting it by us," Spence said. "This has been going on for years."

Spence said the authenticators aren't going to shoot down a single-signed ball that has a real signature on it simply because autographs have been removed. At the same time, he wants to make it clear he doesn't condone this process, and he's concerned that less-discerning authenticators might miss the removals and verify the items as single signed.



In a color photo, the dark shade you see on the sweet spot would be purple. The photo illustrates an example of a ball with a signature removed.

"When we authenticate a ball that has signatures removed, it's disclosed, our letter would fully state that there was a removal," Spence said. "I wouldn't say I'm comfortable with this. However, with the multitude of things being out there with removed autographs, and the single signature being valid, there's really nothing else that can be done."

Spence said he also sees balls on which people covered signatures on side panels with stamped or painted logos or pictures. "It's just another example of changing a multi-signed item into a single signed one, which increases the perceived value in the marketplace," he said. "The only thing you can do is mention it in the LOA."

"It's still a piece of marketable memorabilia. If there's a full disclosure ... well, still, I don't want to collect an item that's been tampered with. If you want to buy a poor man's Ruth-signed ball, this is a way of getting one. Take it whatever way you want."

Berman said the fact that MastroNet auctions are selling balls with autographs removed legitimizes the process. He said the company will be setting up at Tristar shows in Houston in January and San Francisco in February so "collectors can come and see for themselves the quality of the work that we do." ♦

Rocky Landsverk has been covering the autograph industry for *SCD* for more than 10 years.