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## Michael Smerconish | THE COLLEGE KID WHO TACKLED T.O.

AT ITS CORE, the T.O. story is about "hard work" and "persistence."

No, I'm not talking about T.O., Donovan or Andy. I'm talking about Graham. Graham Bensinger, that is. Get used to hearing his name.

He's the 19-year-old Syracuse University freshman who, while pursuing a journalism degree, bested the full-time reporters by landing the interview with T.O. in which the former Eagles superstar fired a broadside at Donovan McNabb. It was Graham Bensinger who asked T.O.:

"Your friend Michael Irvin recently said that if Brett Favre was the starting quarterback for the Philadelphia Eagles, they'd be undefeated right now. What do you think of that comment?"

To which, as everyone in Philadelphia now knows, T.O. responded: "I mean, that's a good assessment. I would agree with that."

I caught up with Graham via telephone from his dorm room, before class. I wondered whether he realized the scoop he had on his hands the moment T.O. gave that answer.

"I didn't realize it would be as controversial as it became. But I shouldn't have been surprised. Terrell is brutally honest."

Graham should know. This was not his first time interviewing T.O. I asked him how, exactly, he was able to land the interview with T.O. - in his Moorestown, N.J., home no less - in a climate where T.O. has shut out the local media. He told me it was due to his "prior relationship."

Prior relationship? A college freshman? Now I was more interested in the Graham Bensinger story than the T.O. saga.

It turns out that Graham met T.O. at a celebrity basketball tournament when Graham was in his sophomore year in high school. Of course, by the 10th grade, Graham's career in sports journalism was well under way.

It has its roots in his start of a trading card business on eBay. By the eighth grade, he had branched out with his own Internet radio show. For the launch, he dispatched 50 invitations to Hall of Famers, and landed interviews with the four who responded: Ernie Banks, Bob Feller, Tim Lincecum and Will Clark.

The Internet show led to a weekly program on a commercial radio station in St. Louis, then ESPN Radio, and now a contributor role at ESPN.com. The rest is becoming history.

His interviews are not child's play. He's already a serious journalist. He has a great sense of timing and poise, and asks well-articulated questions. I told him he sounds like a Bob Costas and Howard Cosell. He told me he would "take that any day."

The Graham Bensinger archives already include interviews with O.J. and Pete Rose. But when asked, he is quick to point out that it is T.O. who has treated him like a professional.

"It is unfortunate how it all came down. Here you had this guy who welcomed me in his home, gave me all the time in the world I could possibly want, he allowed me to sit down with him for an hour, and would have given me more time if I had needed.

"I conducted an hour-long interview with him and all that comes out are the four to five minutes of the most controversial stuff. Unfortunately, I had no control over that, but the interview wasn't predicated on negatives."

Graham Bensinger told me that, in the last few days, he has had to answer many questions about his own success.

His answer: "Hard work and persistence. That is what it comes down to. If you work hard and are persistent, you will be able to get things done."

Then Graham had to run. He had a writing class in a few minutes. I should've asked if he was the teacher or student.

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*Michael Smerconish can be heard weekdays 5:30-9 a.m. on the Big Talker, 1210/AM. Contact him via the Web at [www.mastalk.com](http://www.mastalk.com).*

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