





# Big league logos

Can a great logo design also lead to success in sport? **Garrick Webster** shares advice for your own logo projects from the iconic imagery and strong typography used in North American football, ice hockey, baseball and basketball

**Logo design doesn't come much more exciting than in North America's major league sports.** The British are every bit as passionate about their teams, but it's harder to fall in love with football team crests, for example. The heraldic Manchester United shield or Arsenal's cannon both symbolise old traditions, but they hardly speak to the imagination like the quiet menace of the Memphis Grizzly, or the frenzied attack of the San Jose Shark. And let's face it, as a mascot Liverpool's liverbird couldn't live with these guys.

American sports did have a traditional approach to team identity. The big leagues of today were once pretty small, playing to half-empty stadiums and failing to fully embrace television. "The National Football League changed the way it worked," says designer Terry Smith. "Pete Rozelle, the commissioner of the NFL in its early days, got the owners to realise that if they pooled their resources and basically came together, then they'd be a much stronger entity."

The drafting of players, television contracts, merchandise and team identities were gradually signed over to the league. The NFL has been copied not only by Major League Baseball, the National Hockey League and the National Basketball Association, but in sports across the world including the English Premier League. →

→ There's still regard for tradition in the NFL, for example with teams such as the San Francisco 49ers. But there was a passion to bring a new and improved element when the team's brand was redeveloped by Rodney Richardson of RARE Design: "The SF oval icon on their helmets is basically sacred. You don't mess with that. But everything around that logo was in shambles; different colours, different typefaces and different graphic styles. So what we did was wipe the table clean of every mark except the SF oval and rebuilt everything from that foundation."

Class and strength were the key themes with the 49ers logo, and strength came to the fore again when Richardson

tackled the logo for a new franchise, the Houston Texans. Houston had lost its NFL team when the Oilers moved to Tennessee and became the Titans. So the process began with choosing a new name. The Texans was picked, so everyone in Texas could relate to the new club. But what about a logo? Dallas already had the Cowboys; they couldn't go back to oil. Mustangs and colts were considered, but Richardson, NFL Properties and an external agency chose the bull's head.

"The rodeo bull, the compacted mass of muscle, horns and adrenalin will make even the toughest cowboy shake in his boots," he explains. "It didn't take much to realise that's the representative we wanted, the team wanted and with which the region could identify. As for colours and symbolism, how could we not make use of the banner and colours that represent what some from the state still call The Nation of Texas?"

The National Hockey League took its cue from the NFL, expanding from



**Rodney Richardson, RARE Design**  
 "For a while it seemed that leagues and organisations were designing logos intended to market products to kids. 'How does this look on a trash can?' and, 'Would a ten-year-old kid buy this?' were the driving factors for logos. This mindset resulted in a lot of the cartoony looks of the 90s. Our belief is that if we authentically represent the sport, the personality of the team, and the athlete that the fan is emulating, then the market value and desirability of the identity will be inherent. And, more importantly, teams and athletes would be proud to wear it."  
<http://rare-design.com>

six teams in 1967 to 30 today. It's meant a shift towards dynamism – the Maple Leafs and Redwings joined by the New Jersey Devils, San Jose Sharks and Colorado Avalanche. In 1990, Terry Smith was invited to create a logo for San Jose, a decidedly non-icy city. "I didn't feel North East hockey looks were going to appeal to their demographic. The kids that they were going after – and I do say kids – were Californian. So to me it was important that they have a look that, if anything, tied into that crowd, looking at more surf designs and different colours and all of that stuff."

Chomping a stick in half, with a colour scheme of black, white and teal, the shark hit hockey like a body check, but proved a worldwide marketing success. Smith has returned to the logo to clean it up and make it easier to reproduce. As he points out, being non-traditional isn't always easy. "A lot of the time when the new teams are formed they'll pick these esoteric names, things like Storm, Lightning, Fury, Rain – names that it's hard to put an image to. The baseball team we just finished doing a project for changed their name to the Dash!"

As a designer in the creative services department at the NHL, Joe Bosack had an identical problem when the Quebec Nordiques relocated to Colorado and became the Avalanche. "It's difficult →

The shark hit hockey like a body check, but was a marketing success



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01-02

The oval logo on the helmet is the **49ers' main logo**, but for other merchandise a second logo was created based on the team's name

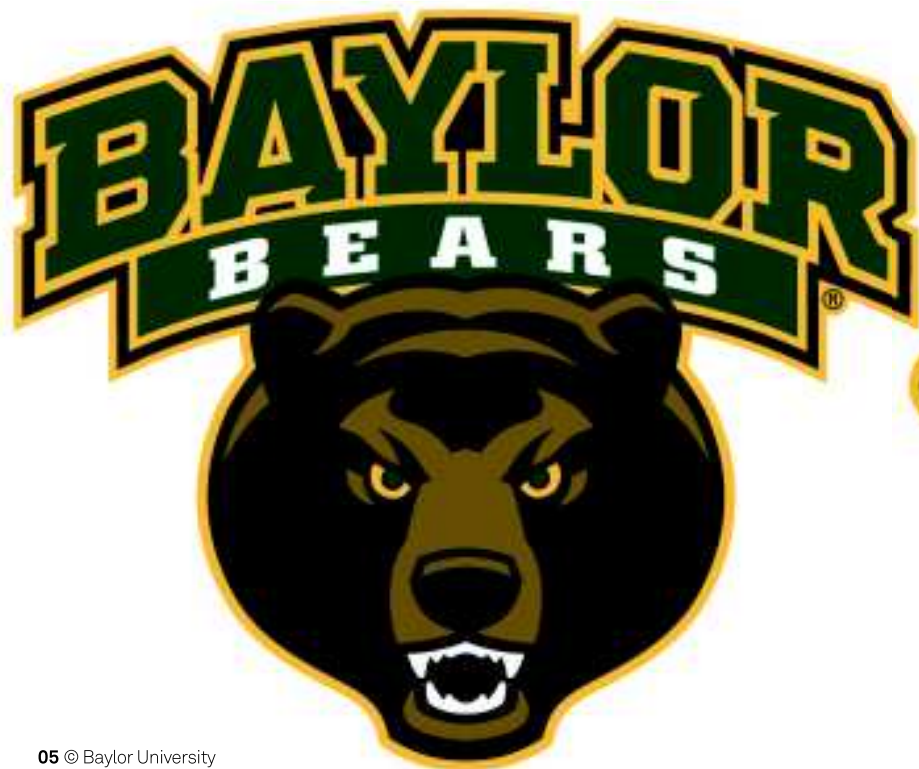
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RARE Design **reworked the 49ers' identity** with an emphasis on strength and class, although the team's oval icon was sacred

04

The **Houston Texans branding** is so simple and strong it works well whether it's on the side of the stadium, on a helmet or a TV graphic

**HOUSTON**  
**TEXANS**



05 © Baylor University



06 © Minor League Baseball



07 © University of Connecticut



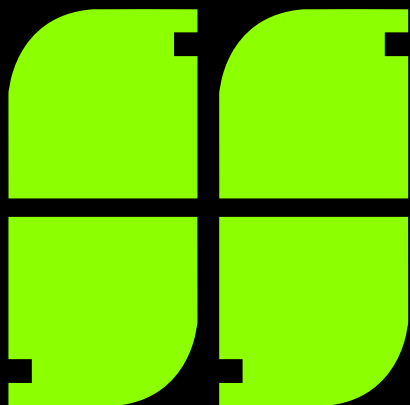
08 © University of Central Florida

05  
Waco's Baylor University competes in a range of sports and asked Eric Rickabaugh to create this logo. The type can be used without the bear

06  
With a younger, family audience, and low ticket prices, Minor League Baseball promotes fun and entertainment. Logos like the Fisher Cats' suit this market

07  
The University of Connecticut uses Eric Rickabaugh's Huskie logo for sports ranging from baseball right through to volleyball

08  
The logo for University of Central Florida Knights basketball team was designed by Rickabaugh. The helmet and 'UCF' are also used as secondary logos



## Q&A

In addition to the NBA and NFL, **Eric Rickabaugh** and his studio have created logos for college teams. He takes us inside this design niche

### How is working for college teams different to the big leagues?

Collegiate branding is much more challenging than for pro teams. The politics on a college campus are so much more intricate. A university's audience is quite complex being composed of students, coaches, student-athletes, staff, administration, fans, the media and alumni – just to name a few!

### So how does that affect the logos?

They need to be more timeless. Change is not a welcome guest on most college campuses where tradition is king. Unlike pro sports where identity makeovers are almost part of the plan for continually sparking market sales, in collegiate branding the hope is to create a brand that can last decades, or even longer.

### Can you give an example of how political sensitivity has affected logos?

Collegiate marks cannot be offensive in any way. This is the reason that we have been very busy over the last few years helping schools replace their Native American nicknames, while the Cleveland Indians (MLB) and Washington Redskins (NFL) live on. One example is our work for the University of Louisiana at Monroe.

### Would you say college logos are more serious than major league logos?

Most pro sports fans understand that their favourite team is mostly a source of entertainment, but a collegiate athletic brand is representing a centre for higher education. Our new logo for Western Carolina's Catamounts is a much more

appropriate collegiate mark with its serious air.

### What key things make a great logo?

It must be unique, bold and fun. It must make the fans want to buy products emblazoned with the team logo. It must make the players want to proudly wear the uniforms and represent the fans to best of their ability. It needs to inspire new people to become fans, and other athletes and coaches to want to be a part of this tradition. It's a lot to ask of a logo design but the best sports logo designs do all of that!

### Which sports logos inspire you?

In the NBA, I love the Miami Heat logo for its simplicity. In the MLB I also enjoy the simplicity of the Angels logo. I have a lot of respect for the Yankees logo in its durability over many, many years. Another long-lasting logo that still works wonderfully is the NHL's Red Wings mark. I have tremendous respect for the NFL as a league for the overall consistency of its brands. Most of the logos are quite inspiring, including the Tampa Bay Buccaneers and the Houston Texans.

### And what teams do you support?

As an Ohio State graduate I do back the Bucks with a passion and lately that has been a pretty rewarding thing to do. Unfortunately, my favourite pro team is the Cincinnati Bengals and that has been very challenging. Our staff also become fans of every team we work for and it's a lot of fun cheering them all on. <http://rickabaughgraphics.com>



09 © The Western Carolina University



10 © The University of Louisiana Monroe



11 © The Ohio State University

09

With a cat as their mascot, the **Western Carolina University Catamounts** have a serious and traditional look

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The University of Louisiana at Monroe retired its 'indian' logo after Native American nicknames were banned. Rickabaugh's studio rebranded them the **Warhawks**

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An Ohio State graduate himself, Rickabaugh used the 'O' as the foundation of this logo's typographic architecture to make it the epitome of **typical collegiate branding**

→ because there's no concrete form to start from and liberating in that you are free to define it," he explains. "In situations where there's a lack of useable imagery, I focus on elements of the game, or related geography as creative tools. This was true with the Avalanche and resulted in a mark that shows power, and strength that ends in a speeding puck."

Bosack's logo nicely incorporates a 'C', an 'A' and a lot of ice. He came up with the overall jersey design, to which another designer added a Yeti footprint to round off an altogether mountainous look.

Basketball has followed a similar pattern of growth and experimentation. The Philadelphia 76ers are the oldest franchise in the NBA. They came to the city in 1963 and named themselves after 1776, the year the Declaration of Independence was signed in Philadelphia. Their logo, a basketball graphic with text and stars, only looked half-finished though, so in the mid-90s Eric Rickabaugh was called in to give the team a new look. His team presented the NBA with about 40 sketches, which were whittled down.

The chosen design linked to the old logo with the stars and stripes, but brought more expressive text and a contemporary colour scheme: red, black and gold. "The new identity was quickly embraced by the Philadelphia fans and the 76ers merchandise skyrocketed in



**Terry Smith, TSC**  
 "When you're doing a sports logo you need to consider how it's going to be manufactured. When I'm doing my designs there's no colour blends or fades because you can't stitch that, it doesn't reproduce well. I make sure that most of my logos have a heavy black outline, because a lot of times in the old days when they were silk screening these things you needed to be able to trap colours easily. I also look at bold, clean graphics, so they reproduce well even when the logo gets reduced down small. [www.terrysmithcreations.com](http://www.terrysmithcreations.com)

popularity. As luck would have it, the team's on-court performance took off at the same time and a perfect storm occurred in the franchise's marketing. It was a huge success," he says.

Rickabaugh is known for using expressive typography, a common technique in big league designs. If the main logo is a character or object, the secondary one is often text, or vice versa. Rodney Richardson at RARE Design has also worked with the NBA for the Memphis

Grizzlies (see page 70) and the Miami Heat. For the latter, he created an MH logotype to complement the burning basketball of the main emblem. "We wanted to explore the option of a ligature that would represent the city. When viewed with the existing system, there was no question this was the best fit and best communicator for the team. Their primary logo already represented the fire, the passion and the energy of the team. We needed a complementary logo that could be more →



The team's on-court performance took off at the same time as the identity



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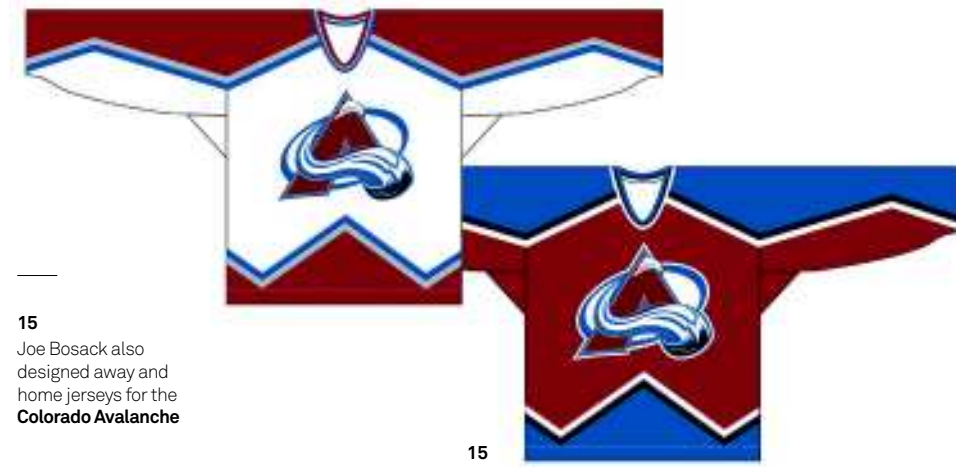
12 The stars and stripes reflect the **76ers historical roots**, but Rickabaugh's use of gold makes the colour scheme more dynamic

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13 The **original 76ers logo** was looking dated by the mid-90s so the NBA asked Rickabaugh to create something for modern audiences

14 The **classic Boston Celtics logo** was designed in the 1950s by Zang Auerbach, brother of the club's founder, Red Auerbach



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15 Joe Bosack also designed away and home jerseys for the **Colorado Avalanche**

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# The anatomy of a Memphis Grizzly

## Strength and passion were two key themes embraced by RARE Design's Rodney Richardson when he built the Memphis Grizzlies' logo

The RARE Design approach to sports logo design has four steps. The first is understanding – the team researches the organisation it's designing for, the region and its history, the vision for the club and the relevance

of the team's name; in this case a grizzly bear for the NBA's Memphis Grizzlies.

The second stage is to think. This means taking the research and getting down the brand's core values and how to communicate

them. When this has congealed, they start step three: to create.

This entails designing things that will represent the club, starting with pencils on paper and lots of sketching, and later on Adobe

Illustrator. Logos, colours and their possible usages are worked up and tested.

The final step is to manage output; a style guide is produced, along with as many possible executions of the identity as possible.

**01** "A little known fact is that in Native American lore, the grizzly bear is known as the 'blue bear' or 'grey bear'. He's considered the master of the skies. Of course Memphis is the City of the Blues, so the colour connotations were right there in front of us."



**02** "The passion – the fire – is communicated through the bear's eyes. The inclusion of the gold colour, the colour of fire in this identity, is a nod to the Egyptian undertones in the city of Memphis. Gold is the colour of Egyptian royalty, and the first home of the Grizzlies in Memphis was the Pyramid."

**04** "The overall composition of the logo is reminiscent of old blues club signage, which exists all around the city of Memphis."

**05** "The flowing in-line execution of the primary typeface was designed to pay homage to the Mississippi River, the lifeblood of Memphis."

MEMPHIS  
GRIZZLIES

**03** "The bear's strength is more solid, more quiet. He will bare his claws if he has to, but it's not a common occurrence. That knowledge was quite parallel with what we learned about the organisation. That's why in the final logo, the strength is represented in the overall demeanour of the bear."

### Secondary logo



This claws/ball logo was the team's original logo when they played in Vancouver, but the colours have been updated to match those of the new logo. While the fierceness is too threatening for the main identity, this aspect of the team's personality was ideal for the secondary logo and valuable for alternatives in incidental usages and merchandising.

Image copyright NBA Properties Inc

Thanks to David Thompson, director of creative services, Memphis Grizzlies



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→ representative of the workman-like city," he explains.

Indeed, type is regarded as the no-nonsense, traditional route in big league logos and is very much associated with the most old-school sport: baseball. There's a simple enough reason for this – a striking letterform works better than anything on the front of a baseball cap. An avowedly retro designer, with his aesthetic heart back in the 1930s, Todd Radom is a perfect fit for designing Major League Baseball logos and has worked with the Washington Nationals and Anaheim Angels.

"A sports franchise tends to look for a re-design when they want to turn the page toward a new era, and that was the case with the Angels," says Radom. "I think they wanted a more traditional look than the one they had in the late 1990s. The franchise used a halo-ed 'A' in the 1970s and 80s. In fact there's a gigantic, 230-foot tall 'A' outside the Stadium, so it made plenty of sense to look at this very obvious icon with a fresh approach. The new look was introduced in 2002 and they won their first World Series that season."



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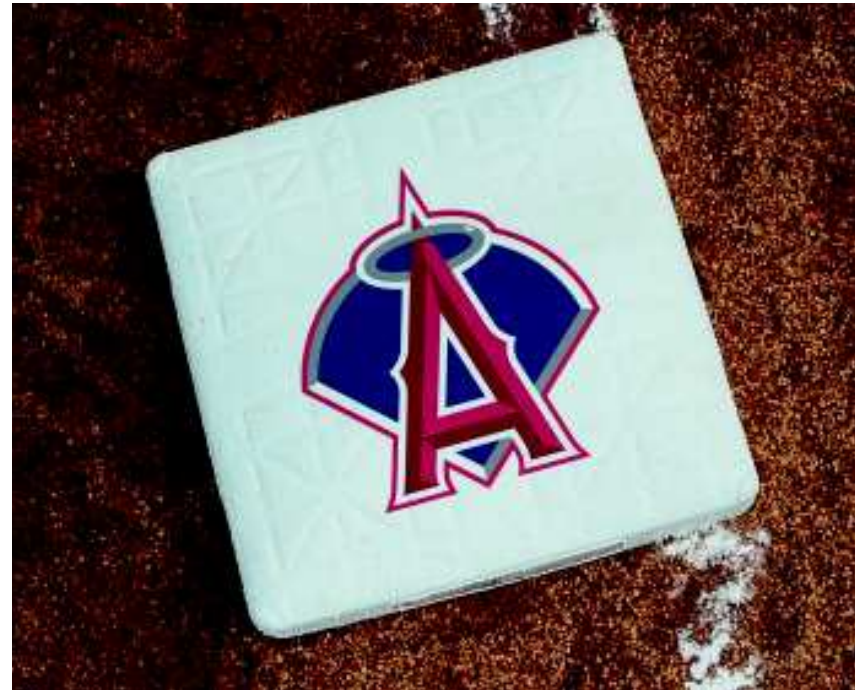
As the logo designer, when a team you've worked for is winning, you feel almost part of the team. As we go to press, the San Jose Sharks lead the NHL, and the link between his new logo and success on the ice is not lost on Terry Smith: "When the merchandise does well, you get a slightly bigger cut because it's your logo and they use that money to sign some guys. Sports logo design today is a huge, huge business."

Turn the page for more about designing a sports logo in our tutorial.



**Todd Radom**

"I think that quality aesthetics come first, followed by practical considerations and then marketing considerations. Form and function have to balance well when it comes to art that will be reproduced across a vast variety of platforms and will be seen, via broadcast, by hundreds of millions of people at any given time. That said, I always try to consider the individual locality, fan base, and visual traditions of the team in question. But job one is making sure that the look excels on the field of play." [www.toddradom.com](http://www.toddradom.com)



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Original designer Terry Smith **revamped the San Jose Sharks' logo** by reducing detail and bringing more ferocity to the shark's face

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A secondary logo for the **Miami Heat** by RARE Designs. As the primary logo has passion and heat, they brought this one down to letterwork

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The **Anaheim Angels logo**, designed by Todd Radom was released in 2002, the same season the team won their first World Series

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Washington had no tradition of MLB when the Montreal Expos moved there. Radom was called on to give them a **sense of history**