

Team Player: An Interview with Todd Radom

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More than a month into the baseball season, all eyes turn to the longstanding rivalries between great, once-great, and wish-they-were-great teams. As fans wear their badges of loyalty in the form of caps and jerseys, one wonders about the designers behind all those sports logos and symbols that define this national pastime and more. There are a few designers who specialize in sports iconography, and one of the most prolific is Todd Radom, who has designed some of its most visible identities ranging from the Washington Nationals to Super Bowl XXXVIII. Here, the Katonah, New York–based logo slugger discusses what it takes to hit a mark out of the park, as well as the traditions and taboos that are endemic to sports graphics.

Heller: How did you become a specialist in sports logos?

Radom: I've been a sports fan, specifically a big baseball fan, since I was a kid. I was always intrigued by uniform designs and logos, and explored these themes as a design student at SVA. My first jobs out of college were in the book publishing industry, designing trade jackets and covers. I probably designed more covers for baseball titles than just about anyone in the late '80s and early '90s. At this time I was branching off into advertising and corporate work, lots of logos. It seemed like a logical move for me to aggressively pitch my talent, knowledge and passion as a sports fan and consumer to the professional sports leagues.

I got my first freelance commission from Major League Baseball in 1992. These days I have sort of a niche within the field of sports design as a historian. I am both a designer who can execute, and a guy who knows the history of sports, as well as the history of sports design. I have compiled a very deep library of uniform and logo designs and histories over the years.

Heller: There's definitely a convention in terms of the design of team brands. How do you balance your design with those conventions?

Radom: There is definitely a visual culture for professional sports in our country, and I think that the need to speak the consumer's language means that we have to live comfortably within those conventions. I personally try very hard to stay away from anything that smacks of trendiness. I want to create a package that will stand the test of time, whether that time frame proves to be three years or 20 years. This is a tough concept to articulate verbally, but I like to think that my work, for the most part, has a carefully crafted, timeless quality.

Event logos are part of our world, too. Logos for Super Bowls, All Star Games, significant anniversaries and the like. These are designs with a limited shelf life and involve some dynamics that set them apart from permanent identity projects.

Heller: Obviously, this is one branding problem that has an immediate impact on its audience. Does the audience have any say in the design?

Radom: Like any other prominent consumer logo, these things go through focus groups and market testing. I have never knowingly had a creative director lay down a mandate that revolved around this kind of “tail wagging the dog” approach, but these consumers certainly expect something that appropriately lives within the visual culture of sports. Sports design relies on the sale of licensed goods, especially apparel, to generate revenue, so it’s incumbent upon me or anyone else doing this kind of work to consider the worlds of fashion and retail to some extent. The peculiarities and traditions of local markets are especially relevant.

Heller: A decade ago the Washington Bullets changed their name for “social” reasons. What are the taboos—such as racial or ethnic issues—in creating sports identities?

Radom: Goodwill is a critical component in trying to connect to the masses. We are trying to appeal to a broad swath demographically, so the sensible concept of “first do no harm” is something that should be employed. Baseball has its Cleveland Indians, football has its Washington Redskins. The influence of sports on our culture is undeniable, even as our tortured national debate on race and ethnicity evolves.

Heller: What would you say is your most “experimental” logo?

Radom: I get called on for more or less traditionally focused identities that project well into the present; I am all about ribbons, retro-inspired typography, and symmetry. The identity that really evolved into something completely different for me would have to be the logo for the World Baseball Classic, an international event that forced me to channel my “inner Paul Rand.”

Heller: There seems to be a trend in sports to return to the past and evoke nostalgia, yet push to the future in terms of logos, uniforms and even stadium design. Is this a valid observation?

Radom: Absolutely valid. Sports franchises provide comfort and continuity in a transient world. There’s something very nice about the fact that the St. Louis Cardinals have employed two birds perched on a baseball bat as their visual identity since 1922. The two new baseball stadiums that will open here in New York next season are faithfully retro-based. I think it’ll be very interesting to see what the public thinks about them in 25 years or so.

There was a trend toward aggressive and complex franchise identities in the early '90s, just as the Mac was becoming the designer's primary tool. I think that we have "devolved" in the years since, back to basics, back to comfort. Like so many trends it seems that in sports the envelope is pushed far to the perimeter, then the pendulum swings back to a sensible and comfortable place. There are exceptions, of course—take a look at the Arizona Cardinals' striking modern stadium out in the desert or the Washington Nationals' new urban (and LEED green-certified ballpark) for example.

Heller: What are the logos extant today that you'd like to see changed and why?

Radom: I would have to start with the NFL Detroit Lions. Most people don't realize that most current NFL logos and helmet designs only date back to the early 1960s, when the great marriage of pro football and television necessitated decorated helmets. The Lions' identity, which was tweaked a few years back, isn't rooted in grand tradition like the Packers' simple "G." This is a franchise that has won only one playoff game since 1957, playing in a city that has gone through decades of turbulence and social upheaval. It would seem to me that the timing is perfect for a new identity.

Heller: Which logos should never change?

Radom: The Montreal Canadiens' visual identity is so integral to the distinct culture of French-speaking Canada that I think it deserves special status. The Yankees' interlocking "NY" connects generations of great teams and fans—and I'm a diehard Red Sox fan so I must appreciate what it represents. The Yankees actually employ two distinct NY's, one on their uniform and one on their cap. (By the way, the ligature was designed by Louis B. Tiffany in 1877, as part of the first New York City Police Medal of Honor. The award was presented to Patrolman John McDowell, who was shot and wounded in the line of duty. The ball club adopted the emblem in 1909.)

Heller: What's next for you?

Radom: This is sort of a dual-headed question. The sports projects that I work on are subject to very restrictive confidentiality agreements, so the most I can say here is that I have a range of prominent projects in the works for Major League Baseball, Minor League Baseball and for the NBA.

My sports workload obviously dominates my time, and I feel very fortunate indeed to be able to combine my passions for sports and design into a sort of a unique career. My goal in the coming years is to diversify a little bit, toward more broadly focused projects. I've worked by myself, for myself, for a long time now, so the idea of more collaborative work is appealing to me.

About the Author. Steven Heller, co-chair of the Designer as Author MFA and co-founder of the MFA in Design Criticism at School of Visual Arts, is the author of *Merz to Emigre and Beyond: Avant Garde Magazine Design of the Twentieth Century* (Phaidon Press). He is co-author of *New Vintage Type* (Thames & Hudson),