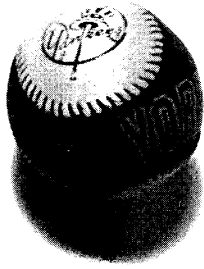**LOGOS HERE! GET YOUR LOGOS!**

by Joe Miller

When the Yankees took to the field in the summer of 1912, they sported a slightly bland NY monogram on their shirts. Aside from incidental variations in weight, their logo hasn't changed since. The real change has taken place in the stands. Whereas not a single spectator in that inaugural year wore their team's emblem, a logo cap and T-shirt (or authentic jersey) is now *de rigueur* at the ballpark. Unlike a corporate logo, a team logo has a personal significance for its audience. Employees often refer to a company symbol as "ours," but in sports it is the consumer – the fan – who would most readily say "our logo." After all, the most visible employees of a sports franchise – the players – are transient, and will likely pledge loyalty to a few teams during their careers. But relocate a fan from Chicago to Los Angeles, and whenever the Bears, Bruins, or Sox are in town, that fan will be rooting for the visitors. Professional sports is the common language of many acquaintances, friends, and relatives. As much as teams are, these people and relationships are represented by sports logos, the merchandising of which is a $15-billion-a-year industry.

Baseball has the longest tradition of sports logos. Many were created from 1910 through the early thirties. Although they were the first of American sports logos, baseball logos were far from groundbreaking. The familiar script lettering with underlining swash that has come to signify baseball was simply the most common style of product lettering in the 1920s and 1930s. Other styles, such as woodtype, cartoon characters, and dehumanizing representations of American Indians, were common across a range of industries before they came to be used to identify ball clubs. The original context of these older logos has disappeared, allowing a haze of nostalgia to develop around the symbols.

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Once anonymous for lack of imagination, baseball's newest logos are anonymous by design. The desire to appeal to as broad an audience as possible has produced logos that blend into the current marketplace as well as into one another. The new symbol for the Seattle Mariners is barely distinguishable from that of the Florida Marlins: either would look at home in the frozen-food section of a supermarket. The Colorado Rockies' logo seems right for bottled water, and the Houston Astros' redesign would be perfect for a generic small-time tech company. The similarity of recent logos is not a coincidence. While produced by various design firms, they were all managed and art-directed by Anne Occi, head of the design department of Major League Baseball Properties. MLB Properties is the licensing and marketing arm of Major League Baseball, which hired Occi in 1990 to bring whatever order was possible to the chaotic field of primary and secondary team logos and their application to thousands of products.

Working much like MLB Properties is the design department of NFL Properties, established by the National Football League in 1963 and headed by David Boss. Most NFL logos were created in the 1960s as part of a league-wide effort to add logos to previously blank helmets. Since the idea was to add images specifically to helmets, many logos ended

up being integrated into the form of the headgear. One of the best examples is that of the Rams, whose design was created by two players for their own helmets and later adopted by the team. Stumbling across designs was a common method of acquiring older NFL logos. The Oakland Raiders, who chose their team nickname in a fan contest, snatched their logo years later from Cardinal Press, which created it for printing on game program covers. Later still, the team colors became silver and black, and the rest is merchandising history.

The Cleveland Browns are proud of being the only NFL team that plays without a logo, in plain orange helmets. In 1963, Browns management attempted to add a "CB" monogram, but was thwarted by a player revolt in training camp led by the team quarterback. The logo ended up never being seen by the public. One logo NFL Properties might wish had never been seen by the public was an early eighties proposal for the New England Patriots. Team management asked fans to choose between the old and new designs at halftime; the new logo was booed off the field.

While no team identity is so austere as the Browns', some NFL logos are very minimal. One of the most popular is the unembellished five-pointed star of the Dallas Cowboys. Tex Schramm, original general manager of the Cowboys, is seen as one of the greatest sports marketers – making cheerleaders into media stars and selling team logos on everything from paper cups to bath towels. Schramm did much of the advance work on the NFL's $4 billion merchandise business. Logos are now created with the sale of merchandise in mind; team identification is practically a side effect.

Some of the most financially successful new logos are coming from the National Basketball Association, which until recently had maintained a tradition of not displaying logos on uniforms. In 1983, when the NBA's Cleveland Cavaliers decided to update their identity, fans and designers alike were invited to submit their ideas. A type treatment submitted by Marcus Advertising of Cleveland was chosen by team management and NBA Properties. What Adrian De Groot, then president of NBA Properties, liked most about the logo was its visibility on uniforms and the positive effect that would have on merchandising. "We want every kid in the United States

to have an NBA hat, T-shirt, or whatever," said De Groot. The interest in visibility is understandable; a televised game equals a two-hour-plus commercial for team merchandise, provided the logo can be seen. The Cavs logo could be seen but not understood, and was replaced with an unusually understated symbol by Sussman/Prejza in 1993. This time the Cavs did hire their design firm — not with the slightest concern for ethics, but with the realization that when specific criteria need to be met, a semblance of the design process must be followed. Fortunately, pro teams seem to have put design contests behind them, saving those designers with low enough self-esteem the insult of submitting entries.

More NBA teams are now displaying more logos on more uniforms. With an aggressive look and modeling by superstar Michael Jordan, one of the biggest-selling logos of all time is that of the Chicago Bulls. The Bulls' uniforms have been redesigned to display three images of the logo; the floor of their home court now displays five. Whatever the angle, a logo is always on screen. In hopes of getting fans to buy multiple uniform reproductions, alternate home and road uniforms were designed. Every true fan needs a complete set. especially if the NBA is to surpass its annual sales of $3 billion. Expansion teams have recently begun to lead the way in logo merchandising. Long before the team introduced its first player, NBA Properties' creative services department, headed by Tom O'Grady, introduced a vicious but cute Toronto Raptors dinosaur logo on the heels of the release of the film *Jurassic Park*. The result was $20 million in sales in the first month, with over a year to go before the team's first game. The Raptors' logo embodies the most sought after qualities of new team logos: bright colors, self-conscious styling, and a central image that appeals to someone who couldn't care less about the sport. Other recent redesigns include the Neville Brody-inspired Sacramento Kings, the retro Houston Rockets, and the Atlanta Hawks, whose logo some liken to a Nazi symbol.

Once obscure to sports fans and merchandisers alike, the National Hockey League now sells upwards of $1 billion in logo merchandise. When Wayne Gretzky was traded from Edmonton to media-rich Los Angeles, the Kings celebrated by introducing a new logo and uniforms. Soon, kids who had never even seen highlights of a hockey game were wearing replica jerseys. The rejuvenation of the Kings paved the way for two expansion teams in California. Designed by Terry Smith, a local freelance illustrator (with colors chosen by team management after consulting trend-watchers from L.L. Bean, Neiman-Marcus, J. Crew, and Bloomingdale's), the aggressive San Jose Sharks logo picked up $350 million in sales during the team's first four losing seasons. That performance was topped by Disney, which named its Anaheim franchise after its movie *The Mighty Ducks*. Culled from over 400 options drawn by Disney illustrators and animators, the logo sold more
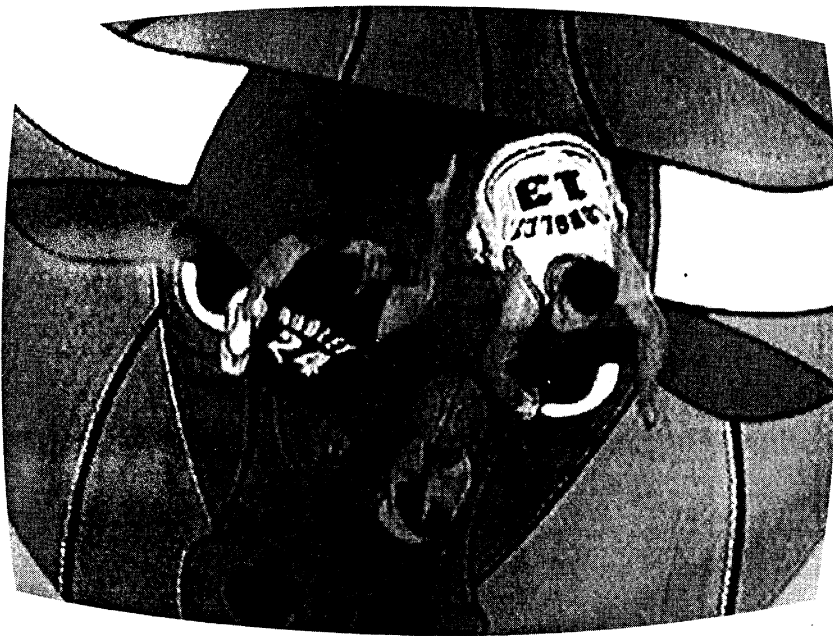
merchandise in its first season than any other NHL team – though the Ducks lost every game they played against the Sharks. More like a duck-billed Freddy Krueger than a goalie, the mark is mean as hell – and kids love it. A new, visually compelling logo can sell a losing team better than actual wins can sell a less exciting logo.

Following the lead of the expansion teams, established franchises are commissioning new images. The once dorky-looking Pittsburgh Penguins have a slick new bird, while the Washington Capitals have introduced a star-spangled eagle that they hope will have patriotic appeal. Designing logo merchandise to appeal to non-fans is now considered essential, and sales are often made in unexpected quarters. Bright, oversized NHL jerseys serve as the uniforms of hip-hop artists and fans. Raiders jackets are the favorite cold-weather gear of several gangs, and the Rockies' "CR" caps are associated with the notorious Crips.

To protect logo profits and ensure the quality of merchandise, Major League Baseball Properties, NFL Properties, NBA Properties, NHL Enterprises, the Collegiate Licensing Company, and Starter Corporation (a leading manufacturer of licensed products) joined forces to create CAPS, the Coalition to Advance the Protection of Sports Logos. In 1994, the two-year-old coalition arranged the seizure of $11 million worth of fake logo products and equipment. Roaming outside stadiums and arenas and in the aisles of America's larger flea markets, Logo Cops team up with local law enforcement to ensure that logos are legit.
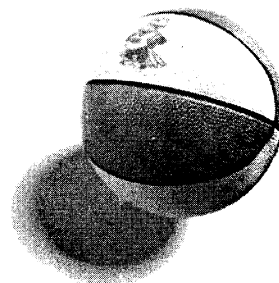
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Except for a team's own souvenir stands and outlets, each league distributes logo royalties evenly between franchises, making cooperation more natural than competition.

With so much to gain on so little investment in design, we should expect a rapid continuation of logo and uniform redesigns. But commerce does not always honor aesthetic ideals. If you would like to see a symbol that is bold yet elegant, with balanced, contrasting forms, there is not much that Major League Baseball, the NFL, NBA, or NHL has for you. Sports logos are either nondescript or downright ugly. Unless, of course, we're talking about your team's – and team logos are often a topic of conversation. At any sporting event you may hear such remarks as "I like their logo" or "Those uniforms suck" as often as discussion of play. In a recent appearance on *Late Night with David Letterman*, Jerry Seinfeld joked that everyone roots for logos instead of players: "Our uniforms can beat your uniforms!" But almost no one laughed. What is comedy one day can be commentary the next.

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