LONGHORN LOGO TURNS 50

In a half-century the Texas Longhorn silhouette has become one of the most recognizable logos in the world. But its adoption wasn’t as simple as you might think. This is the story of how history, luck, and good graphic design collided.

by James I. Bowie
On September 23, 1961, in Berkeley, Calif., the Texas Longhorns took the field wearing new helmets adorned with a graphic symbol: a simple silhouette of a longhorn head. A half-century later, that longhorn is the most recognized logo in college athletics and has come to symbolize not only the UT football team and athletic program, but also the University as a whole.

As he was preparing for his fifth season as head coach of the Longhorns in 1961, Darrell Royal asked sporting-goods merchant William “Rooster” Andrews to design a team logo. The diminutive Andrews, a Longhorn legend from his days in the '40s as equipment manager and occasional kicker for the football team, gave Royal a crayon drawing of a longhorn head. "This is it," Royal exclaimed. "And can we put it on a helmet?" Texas went 10-1 in 1961 and was considered by many to be the greatest Longhorn team ever. As the football program ascended to new heights under Royal over the next decade, winning three national championships, the helmet logo served as the visible symbol of the team's success.

But the story of the longhorn logo starts long before Royal and Andrews. In fact, the longhorn head had been used as a symbol around the University for decades, and across the American West for even longer. Texas historian J. Frank Dobie, in The Longhorns, his 1941 history of the breed and its significance to Texas and the West, noted that in the late 19th century, "A pair of horns was the symbol of the whole cow country and a sign that it never wearied of erecting. No bank was complete without one or more heads, and the picture of another head adorned its checks. Livestock commission companies used the same emblem on their letterheads... On six-shooters with handles of bone, silver and ivory the favorite adornment was the head of a Longhorn."

The use of the “Longhorns” nickname for UT sports teams is generally attributed to the Daily Texan's D.A. Frank, who coined it in 1903. At the time, though, a nickname was informal and unofficial. The Texas team was also referred to as "Steers," "Varsity," and "State." The longhorn head was not a common symbol at UT despite the nascent nickname. The 1906 Cactus yearbook used one to illustrate a school cheer, but UT and its teams were generally represented by more mundane emblems. The interlocking "UT" monogram, as used by the 1905 band, is typical of American collegiate symbols and, although still used today, inspires much less passion than the longhorn logo. Many UT sports teams, such as the 1919 basketball squad, used a symbol featuring a "T" in a star, similar to the logo of Texaco. It was also used by the track team until the mid-'60s.

The “Longhorns” name caught on, though, especially after booster H.J. Lutcher Stark gave the team sideline blankets emblazoned with "Texas Longhorns" in 1913. The blankets also featured what must be considered the first University of Texas longhorn logo, a steer head in three-quarters perspective.

Stark, heir to an East Texas timber fortune, is one of the most influential figures in the University's history. As the football team's student manager in 1910, three years before Theo Bellmont was appointed Texas' first athletic director, he had arranged an impressive schedule of games. He served for decades on the UT Board of Regents and gave generously to UT's academic and athletic programs. His heavy involvement with UT sports made him the quintessential booster, for better or worse.

But after helping lure Dana X. Bible to coach the Longhorns in 1937, Stark had a falling out with
the program. Bible objected to Stark’s customs of sitting on the team bench, suggesting plays, and giving pep talks, telling him, “No team can prosper with two coaches.” Despite that later controversy, Stark was among the second class of inductees into the Longhorn Hall of Honor in 1958. The distinction “father of the Longhorn logo” should be added to his list of contributions to the athletics program.

During the half-century between the introduction of logos by Stark and Royal, different longhorn designs began to appear more often in the athletic program and around the University. Stark himself had kick-started this process. In 1920, he donated a plaque featuring a longhorn head in memory of the UT alumni who died fighting in World War I. The 1922 Longhorn Band sported a longhorn head on its bass drum; because Stark paid to outfit the band, its safe to assume he had a hand in it. Similarly, a longhorn head graced the main entrance to Memorial Stadium when it opened in 1924. Stark had also been instrumental in raising funds for the stadium’s construction.

Soon longhorn symbols appeared in the Cactus, on the varsity letters of the Women’s Athletic Association, and on the sweaters of yell leaders. They were carved into the Texas Union and Clark Field, and hung above Gregory Gym. They were used in card displays by football crowds, by the campus literary magazine, The Longhorn, and by the UT Boodlers musical group. They appeared on the uniforms of the tennis team in 1936 and the swim team in 1939. In the ’40s, UT students began to wear T-shirts with longhorn emblems to play intramurals and as casual attire.

In 1941, Life magazine ran a cover story on Bible’s powerhouse football squad that featured extensive use of the longhorn head that had been painted on the Memorial Stadium scoreboard, providing national exposure to the symbol in the
days before television. The scoreboard continued to display that longhorn through the mid-'60s.

Aside from brief use by the tennis and swim teams, longhorn logos were not found on UT sports uniforms until 1961. But in the '50s, several teams wore the symbols on their warmup outfits, and the Longhorn Band continued to use them on its uniforms and on the Big Bertha bass drum. The Hook 'em hand sign, introduced in 1955 by cheerleader Harley Clark, was essentially a physical version of the logo.

So Andrews' crayon sketch can hardly be considered original; longhorn heads were everywhere at UT in 1961. Royal's genius was in placing the logo in what was to become, as television coverage of college football grew, the prime piece of real estate in college athletics: the side of the football helmet.

That Royal would be so instrumental in the development of the logo should come as no surprise. His prowess as a coach extended beyond the X's and O's of the gridiron to what we would today call branding; he realized the importance of managing a team's image.

For instance, in discussing his “flip-flop” blocking scheme, another 1961 innovation, Royal noted, "The flip-flop gained national prominence not because of its explosive results, but because its name is a form of advertising. And who says it doesn't pay to advertise? In Colorado there are 30 mountains taller than Pike's Peak. Name one."

Royal clearly understood that adding a logo could benefit a team. In 1968 he recalled how, as a boy growing up in Hollis, Okla., he had gone to Norman to watch the Sooners play for the
first time and known instantly he had to play for that team himself someday. "I saw those big red helmets with the white 'O' on 'em," he said, "I knew I couldn't go anywhere else." While his memory betrayed him (Oklahoma's helmets were plain during Royal's childhood), he recognized the effect that a powerful graphic symbol might have on a high school recruit. Throughout the '60s, many college football teams followed Texas' lead, adding logos to helmets that had been blank or simply marked with uniform numbers.

In 1961, the new longhorn logo was not the familiar burnt orange of today, but the brighter orange used by UT at the time, and it sat on the helmet below the players' numbers. In 1962, Royal decided to replace that orange with burnt orange. The Longhorns had worn burnt orange before, in the '20s and '30s, when Coach Clyde Littlefield had switched from a bright orange that tended to fade with washing, resulting in rivals labeling the Longhorns as "ye low bellies." Some thought that Royal's move was made to help the Longhorn offense deceive its opponents, as the football would blend in with the burnt orange jerseys, making it difficult to identify the ball carrier, but the Longhorns seemed to be just as successful on the road in their white uniforms.

In any event, the change to burnt orange was another instance of Royal's branding acumen. Plenty of teams wore orange, but the burnt-orange shade was unique to Texas and fostered a distinct identity for the Longhorn program. The University went along with Royal and proclaimed burnt orange its official color in 1967.
Royal also realized that ornamentation for its own sake could be detrimental to a team’s image, and he maintained a minimalist, “less is more” philosophy when it came to the Longhorns’ look. When it was suggested that the Longhorns add stripes to their uniform, Royal famously replied, “Hell, no. I’m not going to candy this thing up. These are work clothes.” Rather than “candying up” the Texas helmet, Royal stripped it down, removing its orange center stripe in 1962 and moving the uniform numbers from the side to the back in 1967, resulting in a clean look that highlighted the distinctive Longhorn logo. That look remains virtually unchanged today.

Despite the prominence of Royal’s version of the Longhorn logo, other Longhorn variants remained common around UT. One with particularly protuberant ears was featured in the 1964 *Cactus*. The polo shirts worn by the football coaching staff actually went from being embroidered with the Royal longhorn to this “big-ears” version between 1963 and 1964. In the ’70s, the swim team had its own more abstract Longhorn logo, which was also used by the women’s swimmers’ student booster group, the Steer Studs. In the early ’80s, the women’s tennis players wore the Royal longhorn on their skirts, but featured a more stylized logo on their tops. And more realistic and detailed Longhorn head symbols continued to be popular.

UT sports publications often were adorned with the University seal or various cartoon Longhorns that had emerged over the years. The 1960 football media guide featured two cartoon Bevos above a portrait of Royal, one grinning, one snarling, like the UT version of the masks of comedy and tragedy. When Bill Little began his long tenure in the Texas sports information office in 1968, the departmental letterhead featured a cartoon
and the gymnastics program, but in general there was much more consistency in the steer head symbolism employed by UT. This more consistent use of the Royal logo bolstered its impact as the best-known symbol of the University.

That impact paid dividends, and not only in terms of the University's image. Over the last several decades, the marketing of licensed college products changed from being local to nationwide; as a result, it's now common to see T-shirts and hats with the Royal longhorn all over the country. The success of UT sports teams, along with the visual appeal and distinctiveness of the burnt orange longhorn logo, has helped Texas outsell all other universities in licensed merchandise for each of the last five years, according to the Collegiate Licensing Company. The associated royalty income to UT exceeds $10 million annually.

Some of that money comes from unlikely sources outside the UT community. The symbolic power of the Royal longhorn is apparent not only in the passion it generates in Longhorn fans, but in the obsessive antipathy it inspires in Texas' longtime rivals. Sooner fans show their dislike and even jealousy of UT by displaying inverted longhorn logos, which are sometimes sold in special "upside-down" packaging north of the Red River, with royalties from each sale returned to UT. They also express these feelings using the "Horns Down" hand signal, the limp-wristed inverse of the "Hook 'Em" sign. The preferred method of symbolic desecration employed by the Aggies is to "saw off" the horns of the logo, in keeping with the dictates of the Texas-centric Aggie War Hymn. Opposition to Texas often seems as vital to longhorn. When it ran out in the early '70s, Little replaced it using the Royal longhorn logo, which he thought projected a more serious image, and he began using the logo on more publications, such as the 1973 basketball media guide.

By the mid-'80s, the Royal logo had become the standard longhorn logo across the athletic program and the University. Some stragglers continued to use other symbols (The ALCALDE persisted with its own longhorn head until 1997), and the Royal longhorn was occasionally modified by groups such as the Longhorn Luvs dance team.

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From Top: Kansas Pacific Railway; Beaumont Rice Mills; Longhorn Fruits and Vegetables; Miles Boots; Toy Lawn Mowers; Longhorn Toilets Bowl Gasola; Houston Texans; Fort Worth's "Molly"
the identities of these schools’ fans as support for their own teams. In a sense, the Royal longhorn has become the most prominent symbol of identity for not just one university, but for three.

Despite the intensity of rival fans’ feelings for Texas, it’s hard to imagine that they would be quite as concerned with the Longhorns’ main logo if it were, say, the interlocking “UT” or the Texaco-style “T-in-a-star” mark from the early 20th century. Likewise, without the Royal logo, it's unlikely that the Longhorns’ athletic prowess alone would result in as many millions of dollars in merchandising revenue for UT. For it is the specific design of the logo that makes it so symbolically effective.

The designer who translated Rooster Andrews’ drawing into the emblem that appeared on the Longhorns’ helmets in 1961 is forgotten to history, but he or she must be commended. The Royal logo is clean and striking. Without the anatomical details such as eyes and nostrils that characterized many of the pre-1961 longhorn logos, it is simple and uncluttered. It communicates the strength of the longhorn without appearing ponderous, like the City of Fort Worth’s “Molly” logo. By using a distinctive shape, rather than initials, words, or detailed illustrations, the logo is concise, memorable, and unmistakable.

The design of the logo may be attributed in part to when it was created. Logo designs follow the styles of the times, and in the early ‘60s, U.S. trademarks were becoming more simple, clean, and bold as a modernist influence swept the American graphic design scene. Had UT adopted its logo in the ’70s, when logo design became even more simplified and abstract, it might have looked like the symbol of the UT Press, designed in 1978: a clever combination of the longhorn and a lone star, but perhaps not as appealing to a passionate sports fan. If the logo had been created at the turn of the millennium, it could have resembled the Houston Texans’ emblem, echoing the original Stark longhorn with its three-quarters perspective. Designed today, the logo might follow the current trend of sports logos that try hard to express aggression and intimidation, like the logo from hatmaker Zephyr, marketed toward younger Texas fans.

The longhorn logo that Darrell Royal placed on the Texas helmet has remained unchanged, other than its switch to burnt orange in 1962, for half a century. It has stood the test of time and become a classic Texan, and American, symbol. Its enduring appeal might best be explained by Dobie, who, in discussing why longhorn skulls were so prized and longhorn head emblems so often used by the cowboys and businessmen of the old West, wrote:

That head signifies not only an occupation, but a kind of honor that men not engaged, as well as those engaged, in it would render the animal on which it rested. That head symbolizes strength and power and wide-ranging freedom in the great out-yonder. As generations are outmoded, their artifacts and geegaw ornaments are discarded with them, but something in the mighty horns of the Texas steer has kept them from the junk shop. They are more highly prized today than ever before.

there will be repercussions.

TT: What will they be?
JZ: There will be fewer classes, bigger classes, fewer degree program offerings, and insufficient funding for financial aid. So there will be fewer students who can afford to go to UT. We also cut funding for research. Everything was cut. Higher education is expensive, but it is an investment. Now, had the university officials been free to articulate their needs and the repercussions of a lower level of funding, they could have been more effective.

TT: Why didn’t they?
JZ: My understanding, from reliable sources, is that across the board, throughout Texas, higher education officials were instructed not to complain.

TT: By whom?
JZ: By the regents. I know from private conversations, they were muzzled. There was a gag order. It was very obvious.

TT: Why was the Legislative Oversight Committee on Higher Education Governance and Transparency formed?
JZ: This new committee was given very specific areas of concern: the governance structure of state universities; the manner in which the governing boards and administrators of those institutions develop and implement policy decisions, including the impartiality of their processes; and any other matter relating to excellence, transparency, accountability, or efficiency. Importantly, the committee shall make recommendations, including for legislative action, at the times the committee considers appropriate and shall make a report in advance of each regular session. That means this committee is not going away.

TT: When can we expect a first hearing, and what will it be about?
JZ: I hope in September. We want to bring in national organizations, people who know about higher education governance, who can come in and share best practices from other states with us. In no way is an investigation intended to result in hanging someone. What I’m hoping is that we will be able to find areas of agreement and be constructive in addressing the priority issues of higher education in an impartial and thorough way, without any one group or person dictating the future of higher education in Texas.

TT: You mean like the TPPF?
JZ: I don’t know the Sandefers. I don’t know more than a few members of the Texas Public Policy Foundation. But I do know this: it is wrong—absolutely, positively wrong—for any person or any group or any organization to hijack the higher education agenda of Texas and try to dictate or change its direction. Do they deserve a seat at the table? If they want one. But the table is not theirs. That’s what was happening. They set the table, and they were the only guests.

TT: Why did this all become a controversy at UT?
JZ: I lay it at the feet of Gene Powell.

TT: Why?
JZ: No. 1, his unfortunate metaphor of the Bel Air and the Cadillac. (Opining on the prospect of a $10,000 degree, Powell said in March that it would be more like a Chevrolet Bel Air than a Cadillac, and that there was nothing wrong with a Bel Air-quality education.) Then his questionable hiring of Rick O’Donnell. Hiring him before the job description was written or posted. Hiring him during a freeze. Offering him a salary of $200,000, giving him the title of special adviser to the board, without a vote of the board, and with a job description that paralleled the chancellor’s. And my understanding is that Powell promised O’Donnell that once the legislature left town, he would get promoted to vice chancellor and his salary increased to $300,000. That was perceived as a slap in the face to the chancellor and interpreted by many, myself included, as part of a strategy to fire the chancellor.

TT: What was your reaction to rumors that Chancellor Cigarroa and UT president Bill Powers were going to be fired?
JZ: Dr. Cigarroa and Bill Powers, in