Big Ten Transition

CREATIVE RATIONALE · UW ATHLETICS · 2024-25

On August 2, 2024, the University of Washington officially joined the Big Ten Conference. Ahead of the move, UW Athletics needed a refreshed identity that could introduce Washington to a national audience while still holding on to what makes it Seattle.

So, the system started with a camera. I shot the graffiti walls near Seattle's Gum Wall along with the signage and street-level details around Pike Place Market, cleaned them up with Adobe's generative fill, and rebuilt them as collage walls layered with Washington Athletics, Seattle, and Big Ten assets. Everything downstream, including design direction for all 22 sports, came from those walls.

THE BRIEF

Ahead of Washington's transition into the Big Ten, I proposed and led a visual identity and design direction refresh for University of Washington Athletics that launched on August 2, 2024.

The move put Washington into new territory, a West Coast program from the Pacific Northwest joining a league led by Midwest giants like Michigan, Ohio State, and Nebraska, to name a few. In my head, I wanted the refresh to showcase what makes Seattle unique as a city and introduce the university that sits in the heart of it to a national, Midwest-centered audience.

The refresh had to let viewers feel the grittiness of a big city alongside the natural beauty that surrounds Seattle and the University of Washington, whether that's the Puget Sound, Lake Washington and Lake Union, or the greenery, which is why I pulled tree bark textures from the Washington Park Arboretum into the system. The rain and the greenery, yes, but the key differentiator was UW's positioning in one of the most iconic cities in America rather than a small college town in the Midwest. Seattle had to come through first, and then Washington's place within it.

The system also needed to flex easily across all 22 athletic programs and feel aligned first and foremost. Internally, the way I framed it for myself was, “We are all Seattle, we are all Washington.”

Unlike Forever 10, I wasn't creating a logo or mark toolkit. Most identity transitions are built around a new logo, but this system had to embrace existing assets, integrate UW Athletics, Big Ten, and Seattle marks smoothly, and make them all feel like part of one cohesive identity.

THE IDENTITY HAD TO COME FROM THE CITY

I moved to Seattle in January 2024 after spending a year and a half in West Lafayette, Indiana, working for Purdue Athletics. I grew up in Colorado but had never spent any time in the Pacific Northwest. So, when I started leading the refresh, I wanted to explore some of Seattle's iconic areas, learn for myself what makes the city unique, and tell those stories to the same Midwest audience I had just left.

Pike Place is one of Seattle's most recognizable areas to both locals and visitors. Outside of the Space Needle, Pike Place Market probably sits at a close number two. It's also one of the best places in the city for unique textures and views, whether it's the shops inside and along the outside of the market, the view of the Great Wheel and the pier in the background, the large Public Market signs on either end, the graffitied walls and the Gum Wall corridor close by, or the fish on ice and the produce on display. An outsider recognizes it as Seattle, but most don't know how detailed and simultaneously beautiful and chaotic it is up close. That complex, gritty, yet beautiful persona is what I wanted to communicate about Seattle, and it's how I wanted to market the University of Washington, as Seattle's university.

I built the walls from a multi-day shoot in April and May of 2024, taking around 300 photos of Pike Place Market, the surrounding area, and the pier just down from the market before narrowing them down to about 80. The layered graffiti walls stood out as the best way to maintain Seattle's texture while also including bits and pieces of Pike Place, Seattle, and Washington Athletics. The cornerstone of this identity wasn't a new logo, color palette, or typographic exercise. It was really about showcasing the uniqueness of Seattle and showing people that this city is home to the University of Washington.

BUILDING THE SYSTEM

The walls

I cleaned the raw photographs of the walls with Adobe Photoshop's generative fill, removing stray tags, words, and posters while maintaining the walls' textured nature. Then I rebuilt them as collage walls, incorporating imagery of Seattle from around Pike Place Market and, most importantly, blending UW Athletics wordmarks, logos, and the Big Ten Conference logo into each wall repeatedly.

Two primary walls weren't tied to a specific sport and carried the campaign across every program.

- **The Big Ten wall,** built around UW Athletics and Big Ten marks to introduce Washington to the conference.
- **The Seattle wall,** which blended UW assets with the Public Market sign, the Great Wheel, building murals, the Pike Place pig, among signage and visuals from around the market.

I built two gradient overlays, purple to white and purple to gold, and used them interchangeably across the walls depending on what each graphic needed. The same overlays carried over when the walls were cut into torn paper assets, so the torn strips and the full walls shared the same color treatment, and everything felt cohesive.

From there, each of the 22 programs received its own wall built from the same source material. Each wall featured assets unique to the specific sport, typically in the form of logos and wordmarks, but sometimes it went beyond that. For example, football's wall included beauty shots of Husky Stadium, and softball's wall included sketches of the program's mottos and sayings from a former player, along with illustrated sketches of the Space Needle and the Great Wheel. The graffiti walls were my idea to showcase the layered nature of the city, but over time they also gave each program a platform to include visuals specific to them, which was a great way for every program to feel seen while all falling under one uniform identity for the transition.

The texture kit

- Torn paper, used throughout the campaign
- A repeating logo border built from the Pike Place wooden sign
- The primary texture overlay, a weathered plaster surface laid over every graphic
- Tree bark and greenery textures from the Washington Park Arboretum

Typography: from Univers to Gotham

Throughout the Pac-12 era, UW Athletics used Univers as its primary typeface. Univers is clean and orderly, and it worked well alongside a simpler, less textured look and feel. The Big Ten refresh was the opposite, with torn paper, layered graffiti, and walls pulled straight from Seattle's streets, and next to all of that texture, Univers felt too corporate. I moved the department to Gotham because it could stand alongside the collage walls without getting lost in them. Gotham is geometric and straightforward, which kept graphics readable at game day speed, and I kept the system to two widths, Gotham Regular and Gotham Condensed, so the type stayed consistent while the walls carried the look.

I didn't know until later that Gotham was inspired by mid-century lettering on New York buildings. Tobias Frere-Jones drew it from signage around the city, which is a similar idea to pulling an identity from Seattle's streets. I chose it based on how it fit with the walls and textures, but the shared starting point was a nice bonus.

Color: a muted purple

Washington's primary purple is deep and saturated, and it reads clean and digital, which didn't fit walls pulled from a city street. I muted the purple to be lighter and less saturated, then laid the plaster texture overlay on top so the color sat inside the surface rather than on top of it. The gold received the same treatment. The muted tones gave the grittiness room to come through and made the graphics feel printed and weathered, as if they had been on that wall for a while.

Color	Original	Muted
Husky purple	■ #33006F	■ #492E7A
Husky gold	■ #E8D3A2	■ #ECD5AA

The team

The concept, source photography, and creative direction were mine. A part-time designer and a contract designer assisted in building out the sport-specific walls and implementing the kit, which was delivered as a Creative Cloud system with asset libraries, guidelines, and templates for the entire creative team.

LAUNCH DAY: AUGUST 2, 2024

The refresh officially launched on August 2, 2024, the day Washington joined the Big Ten.

The largest physical piece was a series of street banners I designed for Montlake Boulevard, the main street running past campus. The banners used the evergreen athletics identity rather than the wall system since their job was different, marking the day itself. Digitally, the new system carried the rollout through pieces like “BIG Things to Know About UW,” the W | Big Ten logo lockup, and the torn paper graphic.

The Instagram carousel was the clearest example of what the refresh set out to do. It introduced Washington to people who didn't know much about the program, covering how to say the name, the hashtag, rankings, mascots, and the Olympic year, and it was co-posted with the Big Ten.

ACROSS THE SEASON

22 sports

Each program received its own social icon and X header within the new system, so all 22 accounts felt like they belonged together. The same look also had to work across very different kinds of content, whether it was a countdown to kickoff, a Seahawks partnership graphic, a Purple Out theme night, Cam Clayton getting drafted, a recap of fall programs reaching the postseason, or a softball ticket push.

One full game cycle

Men's basketball is a good example of the system on a single account across a full game cycle, from preseason All-Big Ten honors and the non-conference schedule to game day, the starting five, halftime, and the final score. The torn paper and wall patterns stayed consistent from post to post, with sport-specific elements worked in.

Theme Games

Theme games pushed the system the furthest. For the “Black Out” with men’s basketball, the purple was removed completely, so the torn paper, wall patterns, and type hierarchy had to carry the identity on their own, and the graphics still read as Washington. Football theme nights also ran as a coordinated rollout across social and digital billboards, built on the same system.

BACK INTO THE CITY

The walls started as photos taken on Seattle's streets, and some of them ended up right back out there.

- **Sound Transit:** an eight-week run starting in mid-August 2024, with a side panel and four bus wraps carrying the wall design.
- **Football season ticket box:** premium packaging built from the system for season ticket holders.
- **Commemorative season ticket** for Washington's first Big Ten home game.
- **Reusable cup** sold at Husky home games.

The commemorative ticket and the cup were both produced through the Pepsi partnership, so the system also had to work alongside a sponsor's branding.

RESULTS

The Instagram launch carousel, co-posted with the Big Ten, earned 5,029 likes, and the opening post of the launch-day thread on X reached 94.9K views. The co-post meant the conference shared Washington's introduction with its own audience on day one, which is exactly what the carousel was designed to do.

Beyond launch day, the same system carried all 22 programs through Washington's first year in the Big Ten. What started as a few hundred photos from around Pike Place ended up on bus wraps, ticket boxes, and graphics for every program in the department.

CREDITS

ROLE Concept, visual identity, art direction, and design direction

TEAM Adam Bender, with a part-time designer and a contract designer

CLIENT University of Washington Athletics

LAUNCHED August 2, 2024