

# A City of Champions

## Ypsilanti High School Athletics

BY TINO LAMBROS

### On Your Mark

In the 1898-99 edition of *The Ypsi Dixit*, Ypsilanti High School's first yearbook, these prophetic words appeared:

Athletics may be regarded as a very small part of high school work, and yet for some reason it is being regarded by the colleges of the U.S. more and more as something that is necessary, and therefore to be encouraged. And it needs encouragement. In our high school of over two hundred pupils, with the number steadily increasing, is there any reason why we should not join the State Athletic Association as well as the State Oratorical Association, in which we made so marked an entrance this year? To be sure, no such success could be expected at first; it would take several years of hard training to get the high school accustomed to it and to establish the idea that a man must train as soon as he enters the school.

Although there doesn't seem to have been an athletic department or any official coaches at this time, there was an Athletic Association led by students Arthur Holmes, William Sherman, and Atwood McAndrew. This was the first year that Ypsilanti High School (YHS) fielded football, track, and baseball teams.

The 1897 football team didn't seem to have a coach but elected Clarence Holley to be captain-in-charge. The 1898 baseball team was having a successful season with a 4-1 record at the time their yearbook was printed. Enrollment at YHS was 265 students, grades 9 to 12.

### Get Set, Go!

In 1921, Ypsilanti High School had the area's first outstanding athlete. George Haggarty

led YHS to a “Top 8” finish in basketball. He was named to All-Tournament and All-State Teams. Later, a panel convened to review Michigan high school basketball history and pick a “Mr. Michigan Basketball Through the Ages.” *The Detroit Free Press* selected George Haggarty! He set records in both the low and high hurdles in what would become the state track tournament. He went on to be “All Big Ten” in both baseball and basketball at the University of Michigan.

Ypsilanti grew in the first quarter of the twentieth century. Michigan State Normal College (later Eastern Michigan University) established a teacher training laboratory school on its campus. In 1923, Normal High School opened and graduated its first class, in 1926, as the Roosevelt Rough Riders.

In 1924, Lincoln Consolidated Schools opened. Lincoln was the first multi-township school in Michigan and the first rural consolidated school in the United States affiliated with a teacher college (Michigan Normal). The Lincoln “Rail Splitters” became the third major high school in the Ypsilanti area, all with developing athletic departments.

In 1925, a State Track and Field Tournament was held. Two Roosevelt runners qualified for the event: Jay House in the mile run (he placed fifth) and Bud Giles in the quarter-mile run.

In 1929, the Huron League was formed, bringing together eight Class C high schools along or near the Huron River. The Lincoln Rail Splitters and the Roosevelt Rough Riders were charter members. Lincoln was represented on the founding committee by coach and teacher Larry Dunning, while Roosevelt was represented by athletic director Arthur D. Walker.

By 1930, the forerunner of the Michigan High School Athletic Association (MHSAA), felt it was necessary to standardize and bring continuity to high school sports across the state. It defined the high school football season then expanded to issues such as player residency rules, eligibility, age, and more. There were only four sports: football, basketball, track, and baseball. Today, the MHSAA oversees twenty-eight sports played by both men and women

When Henry Ford built the Willow Run Bomber Plant southeast of Ypsilanti, thousands of workers and their families arrived from all over. Needing housing, the U.S. government built a new residential community northeast of Ypsilanti and named it Willow Run in honor of the bomber plant. A K-12 school district was formed to educate the workers’ children and Willow Run High School soon became the area’s fourth high school. Later, St. John the Baptist Catholic Church added a high school. With St. John High School, the area had five high schools, all with athletic departments.

An attraction for young Ypsilanti athletes came in the 1950s and early 1960s when Ypsilanti native and successful businessman Walter O. “Spike” Briggs became owner of the Detroit Tigers. He built an athletic facility on the Eastern Michigan University campus and named it Briggs Hall. To the east of Briggs Hall was a Briggs Stadium

for baseball and a Briggs Stadium for football. The latter served as pre-season training facilities for the Detroit Lions. Practices and facilities were open for all to watch. Young athletes spent hours observing professional athletes train. This was something special to witness, and they got to know the pros by their first names. The student athletes were able to talk with and get the autographs of their heroes, including Doak Walker, Bobby Layne, Howard “Hopalong” Cassidy, Yale Lary, Joe Schmidt, and more. It is difficult to measure the influence they had on young athletes. Several Ypsilanti area high schools used the Briggs football stadium for their games.

## Winning Teams

On the Huron League’s twenty-fifty anniversary in 1955, a history of the league was published by long-time *Ypsilanti Press* sportswriter Wallace “Scoop” Durfee and the Huron League’s founding members. Highlights of the first twenty-five years of the league include:

**Football.** Although neither Lincoln nor Roosevelt won Huron League championships in football, it was noted that Milan won two football and three basketball championships led by Head Coach Ron Isbell. Isbell later spent many years at YHS as a teacher and coach, and he was inducted into the Ypsilanti Community Schools Athletic Hall of Fame, in 2005. Ypsilanti High School was state champion in 1946, 1947, and 1948.

**Boys Swimming.** The rivalry between Ypsilanti and Roosevelt was intense from 1930 to 1950. YHS coaches James Schaffer and Christy Wilson won eight state championships and had eight second-place finishes. RHS coaches Howard Farnslow and Phillip McLane won two state championships and had two second-place finishes.

**Wrestling.** Ypsilanti High School won state championships in 1956, 1961, 1962, and 1964. It also had several second- and third-place finishes with Coach Bert Waterman.

**Track and Field.** Ypsilanti High boys were state champions in 1925 and 1948 (Coach Ralph Deetz) and runners-up three seasons from 2005 to 2011. With Coach Lamar Miller, Willow Run High School was boys’ state champion in 1959 and 1964. The high school took second place in 1965. Ypsilanti High was 2004 girls’ state champion with four second-place finishes from 1990 to 2008, with Coach Tom Micallef

**Baseball.** Ypsilanti High School was 1986 state champion, with Coach Pat Dignan.

**Golf.** Ypsilanti High School was 1975 state champion, with Coach Claude Wilbanks.

## All Stars

Many local high school athletes went on to professional careers. They include:

**Lowell Perry.** Lowell graduated from Ypsilanti High School in 1949. He was an All-American football player at the University of Michigan and was drafted by the Pittsburgh Steelers. He was being talked about as “Rookie of the Year,” when he suffered a serious career-ending injury.



**Lowell Perry** YHS Football,  
Basketball, and Track, 1948

only touchdown on a famous intercepted pass. He was named as one of the Top-70 Red Skin players of all time. In 2022 his name was added to the “Ring of Fame” at the Commander’s Fed EX Field.

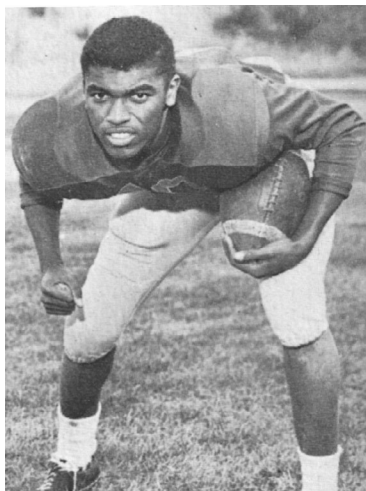
**Rodney Holman.** Graduating in 1978, Rodney was an Ypsilanti High School football player and two-time wrestling state champion. He played football at Tulane University and was an All-Pro tight end playing in the 1989 Super Bowl for the Cincinnati Bengals. He is a member of the Tulane Hall of Fame and the Greater New Orleans’s Sports Hall of Fame.

**Bob Sutton.** Bob was a St. John High School graduate who became a football coaching legend. He began in 1972 as an assistant to University of Michigan’s Bo Schembechler and moved on to several colleges, including eight years as head coach at West Point. He then moved on to pro football, where he is currently senior defensive assistant for the Jacksonville Jaguars.

**C. Robert Arvin.** Bob was a 1961 graduate from Ypsilanti High School. His high school wrestling team won a state championship, and he individually won a state championship. Arvin attended West Point, where he was a member of their wrestling team. While there, he was First Captain and Brigade Commander of his 1965

**Don Schwall.** Graduating in 1954, Don was an Ypsilanti High School three-sport all-state athlete. He accepted a basketball scholarship to the University of Oklahoma. After attending a Boston Red Sox tryout, Don signed as a pitcher. In 1961 he was voted the American League’s “Rookie of the Year” and pitched three innings in the 1961 All-Star game, striking out Stan Musial, the last batter he faced.

**Michael Bass.** Graduating in 1963, Michael was another Ypsilanti High School three-sport athlete. He played football at the University of Michigan and was signed by the Washington Red Skins (now Commanders). He played for ten years, earning All-Pro honors. He played in the 1973 Super Bowl and scored Washington’s

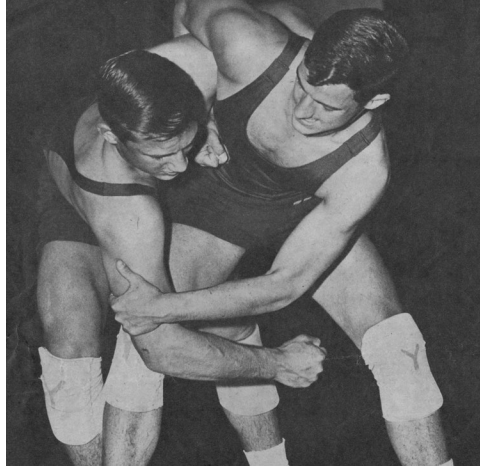


**Michael Bass,** YHS Football,  
Basketball, and Track, 1963

graduating class. In 2005, one of the largest buildings at West Point was named in his honor: The Arvin Cadet Physical Development Center.

### A Lasting Legacy

For more than a century, numerous athletes in the Ypsilanti area high schools have distinguished themselves. Currently, the Ypsilanti Community Schools Athletic Hall of Fame boasts 172 individual inductees and two state championship teams from Ypsilanti High School and Willow Run High School. Many local athletic fields were named in honor of local athletes including Moffett, Shadford, Devlin, and Wright.



C. Robert Arvin (right), YHS Football, Wrestling, and Track, 1961, here with Joe Arcure

These student athletes grew up in Ypsilanti. They played and honed their skills on the sandlots and empty fields around town. Any empty field could be adapted to a sport. A tree was a goal line; a rock or two, a base; a sidewalk or a street, an out-of-bounds line. Teams were composed of whoever showed up. A baseball might be a worn-out old ball taped and re-taped. Bats were rare and often broken, and a boy could try to tape up the crack or repair the break with a wood screw. Games lasted until the equipment broke or the owner of the ball or bat had to go home.

Ypsilanti parks grew and neighborhoods built better fields. With ball fields for all ages, including evening adult softball, Recreation Park was the busiest. Families from all area schools could be found there. Other nearby parks were West Willow, Parkridge, Appleridge, Prospect, Washington Square, Woodruff, Harvest Lane, Riverside, Harvest Moon, and Candy Cane.

This is our legacy. Many came before us that we never knew, but they were the pioneers of high school athletics, our unknown heroes. We are standing on the shoulders of those who came before us. With luck, current athletes will offer their shoulders to the future high school stars of Ypsilanti.

### A Note on Sources

Information for this essay came from the Ypsilanti High School yearbook *The Dixit*; the Roosevelt High School yearbook *Hillcrest*; and the *History of the Huron League: 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, 1929-55*, all of which can be found at the YHS Archives. Additional information was taken from online sources, including the Washtenaw Country Club website,

Lincoln High School website, MHSAA archives, and the Ypsilanti Community Schools Athletic Hall of Fame files, which include information on Hall of Fame inductees. All images are provided by the Ypsilanti Historical Society Archives.

### **About the Author**

Tino Lambros is a lifelong Ypsilanti resident. He played little league sports, earned letters in three Ypsilanti High School sports, taught in the Ypsilanti school system, coached wrestling at the former West Junior High and Ypsilanti High School, and is chair of the Ypsilanti Community Schools Athletic Hall of Fame.