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Prescis:
The Man Who Invented Zebra Stripes

Dr. Lloyd Olds was born in the last decade of the nineteenth century and spent nearly all of his life in Ypsilanti, Michigan, the town of his birth, yet his innovations, policies and practices had a nationwide impact. Olds started his career in sports as a middle distance runner. When he attended Michigan Normal College from 1910-1914, he earned extra money by refereeing intramural sports. By 1920 Olds was a well-respected interscholastic and intercollegiate athletic official and newly hired track coach at his alma mater.

In 1920 Olds discovered that the all-white or all-black attire commonly worn by the referee frequently led to him being mistaken for a player. These mistakes caused interruptions in play that often changed the course of the game, whether it was football, basketball or field hockey. He came to believe that a striped shirt would better identify referees and keep them independent of the action. Consequently, he designed a striped shirt and had a seamstress sew one for him. He found that the innovation worked well and asked the Wilson Sporting Goods Company to mass-produce the shirts. They agreed to do so, and the idea caught on and was ultimately incorporated in official rules as the desired attire for referees. The distinctive uniforms he designed both altered and clarified the role of the referee.

Olds went on to train an influential cadre of physical education teachers and coaches; create a track and field dynasty at Michigan Normal College; implement AAU policy in track and field; and establish physical fitness criteria for the American armed services during World War II. In the process, Dr. Olds influenced sport rules and governance, helped shape the conduct of interscholastic and intercollegiate athletics in America, influenced recruiting practices for college sports, and helped to define the areas of conflict between AAU and NCAA policies and practices.



Manque & Evelyn Winters.