

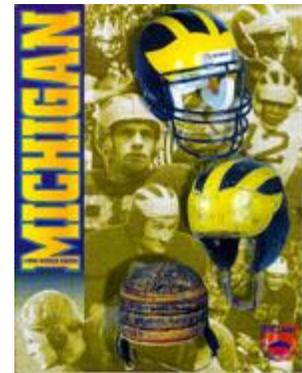
University of Michigan Football

Michigan's Winged Helmet

Michigan's football helmet is surely one of the most instantly recognizable icons in college sports. The famous "winged" design dates from 1938 when Coach Herbert O. "Fritz" Crisler arrived from Princeton to begin a new era in Michigan football. Even as the design and composition of helmets evolved from stitched cowhide to high-tech, molded plastic, the winged design has remained the pre-eminent symbol of Michigan football. Other Michigan athletic teams have adopted the winged design for their own headgear as well.

The distinctive helmet would also have practical advantages on the field. Crisler figured the helmet would help his halfbacks find receivers downfield. "There was a tendency to use different colored helmets just for receivers in those days, but I always thought that would be as helpful for the defense as for the offense," Crisler recalled. [In Crisler's single-wing offense the halfbacks did most of the passing. The quarterback was primarily a blocker or receiver.]

In any event, the new helmet made a successful debut in the 1938 season opener against Michigan State. The Wolverines defeated the Spartans 14-0 behind two touchdown runs by sophomore Paul Kromer to gain their first win over Michigan State in four years. Whether the helmet helped the passing game is hard to say, Michigan completed four of eight attempts for 46 yards with no interceptions. The game certainly marked a change in Michigan's football fortunes. The *Michigan Alumnus* commented, "Michigan has a fighting gridiron outfit once more; a team that knows how to do things and a burning desire-and considerable ability-to do what it wants." Oddly, none of the newspaper accounts of the game make mention of the new helmet.



Sophomore halfback Paul Kromer (83) scored the first touchdown wearing the winged helmet and accounted for 13 of Michigan's 14 points in the 1938 win over Michigan State. In this photo from a later game, he leads the blocking for classmate and "Touchdown Twin" Tom Harmon.

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Crisler's first team went on to compile a 6-1-1 record and tie for second in the conference. Whether attributable to the new helmet or not, the passing game improved significantly over 1937's final statistics; total yardage nearly doubled, interceptions were cut nearly in half and completion percentage was up by nine percent.

Some accounts of the actual design of the new helmet have suggested Crisler came up with the idea out of whole cloth. In fact, Crisler had introduced a helmet at Princeton in 1935 that should

look remarkably familiar to Wolverine fans. The winged design simply took advantage of features of a helmet the Spalding Sporting Goods Company had advertised in the 1937 edition of the *Official Intercollegiate Football Guide*. Crisler's 1938 innovation at Michigan was to paint the helmet maize and blue. His predecessor, Harry Kipke, had also experimented with special markings on the helmets in 1937. Fortunately, though, his designs did not catch-on.



Forest Evashevski, another of the sophomore stars on Crisler's 1938 squad and the only one to start the Michigan State game, models the old style helmet which the Wolverines continued to use during practice. Michigan had worn a helmet of this basic design since the 1920s.

Because so many schools wore the same black or brown helmet, a number of teams added distinctive markings. For three games during the 1937 season Michigan's helmet sported white stripes, but the design was abandoned halfway through the season.



Crisler's design for the Princeton helmet graced the cover of *Spalding's Official Football Guide* for 1938. The photo depicts action from Princeton's game against the University of Chicago, Crisler's alma mater.

The A.G. Spalding & Bros. Company, the nation's largest supplier of football equipment, first advertised its model FH5 helmet in the 1937 *Official Intercollegiate Football Guide*. The helmet is described as "National federation H.S.A.A. approved. A streamlined helmet of tan and black leather. Air-Lite cushion rubber padded and leather lined. Six point suspension straps in crown. Ventilating holes in crown, back and ear pieces. Slide chin strap. Each, \$10.00."



Spalding marketed a number of helmet models that featured the "wing" design. The wing provided additional protective padding and helped bind the earpieces to the crown. The FH5 model was the only one featuring three straps running from front-to-back. One model featured a single strap running front-to-back and another running side-to-side. Other models had a one-piece crown. Michigan's FH5 model came only in black and tan while those with a one-piece crown could be ordered in any school colors for an additional fee.



Michigan State had adopted its version of a "winged helmet" several years earlier. Tom Harmon, shown here in the 1939 game, breaks away from several Spartans wearing a different model of Spalding's wing design. The Spartans wore several models of the Spalding winged helmet until 1948 when they joined the Big Ten and adopted a different style helmet.



The leather helmet eventually gave way to synthetic materials, single face bars were added that have since grown into elaborate cages, the simple slide chin strap was replaced with precisely fitted, double snap straps. Advances in design and engineering, some based on research done at Michigan, have greatly increased the protective capabilities of the modern helmet. Through all the changes Michigan has preserved the design Crisler imported from Princeton to "dress up" and add a bit of style to Michigan's look.

While other schools changed their look when they switched from the leather helmet, Michigan simply painted the wings and stripes on the new material. There have been a few minor changes to the design over the years. The shape of the wing has been smoothed out a bit, the stripes now extend all the way to the base of the helmet and player numbers were added to the side of the helmet during the years 1959-1968.

A design originally based on functional and structural parts of the helmet is now purely decorative. Or maybe it has taken on a new function as symbol of and link to Michigan's great athletic tradition.

Hockey coach Red Berenson had toyed with the idea of incorporating the winged design into the Michigan hockey helmets for a number of years. When he distributed winged maize and blue helmets on the eve of the 1989 CCHA playoffs, his players were at first skeptical, but soon came to appreciate the iconic power of the design. The catchers for the baseball and softball teams and field hockey goalies proudly wear the winged design on their helmets. The swimming team wore the familiar image on its racing caps for a few years. Even the women's rowing team has adopted the winged logo.



If Fritz Crisler were to return to Michigan Stadium, Yost Arena, Fisher Field, or Alumni Field, he would immediately recognize his handiwork.