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HISTORY



Gil
HODGES

GIL HODGES
BASKETBALL
WAS HIS FIRST LOVE

RANDY MILLS

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The sum of a professional athlete's career can often create an illusion, leaving little or no hint about moments of crisis. The story of Hoosier baseball great Gil Hodges is a prime example. Hodges accomplished many amazing achievements during his eighteen years playing professional baseball for the Brooklyn and Los Angeles Dodgers and finishing with the New York Mets. Hodges hit a solid .273 and blasted 370 home runs in his career. His fourteen grand slams place him tied for sixteenth on the all-time list, and he is only one of eighteen major league players ever to hit four home runs in a single game. Hodges was even tougher in the field, being considered one of the best defensive first basemen ever. He is best remembered, however, for managing the "Miracle Mets" to victory over the Baltimore Orioles in the 1969 World Series—a feat *Newsweek* magazine called "the most improbable sports event" of the 1960s.

Hodges's journey to baseball greatness was not always an easy one. There were even a few years, during the late 1940s, when it looked as if he might follow another vocation. It is an interesting coincidence that a young Hodges and tiny Oakland City College in Indiana converged at this juncture, as both were enduring a difficult time.

Besides Hodges's concern about his poor first year showing for the Brooklyn Dodgers, his decision to enroll at Oakland City in the winter term of 1947 was also driven by earlier events in his life. Gil's father, Charlie Hodges, had worked over the years in several coal mines in southern Indiana and had suffered more injuries in mining accidents than most. He often took Gil, and Gil's older brother, Robert, to these mines to remind them how hard and dangerous the work was, telling his sons they would never labor in a coal mine. Charlie died at the age of fifty-seven after being disabled in a mining accident in 1957.

Gil was also a child and adolescent during the Great Depression, an event that left many forever worrying about having financial security. As a high school student, Hodges was very bright and hardworking, and he reasoned that becoming a teacher and high-school coach would be the best route for keeping out of the mines and securing a good job.

The coaching angle came naturally enough. Hodges was a gifted athlete who enjoyed helping younger kids with developing their sports skills. By his final year in high school, it seemed a sure thing he would go to college on an athletic scholarship and, perhaps, even play in a professional sport. Ironically, Petersburg High School did not field a baseball team, so he honed his skills playing sandlot and park-league baseball and later getting recognition and interest from a professional scout while playing as a teenager in American Legion baseball after his senior year. Older brother Bob, however, was considered the better baseball player, perhaps causing Gil to sometimes have a lack of passion for the game and to be more interested

in basketball. The latter became the game Hodges thought he would like to coach in high school and maybe even play as a professional.

Basketball was all but a religion in Indiana during Hodges's time, and the muscular, hard-nosed youth played the game very well, bringing him some positive attention. He dribbled well with either hand and was difficult to defend, bringing the ball down the floor like a guard. While his outside shot was excellent, he could also post up under the basket, where his strength and quickness enabled him to control the game. A local paper reported at the end of Hodges's senior season: "Petersburg possesses one of the great players of the present cage campaign. He is



Oakland City College's 1946-47 basketball team led by Coach Delbert Disler, a World War II veteran. Because of the war, the school shuttered its sports program in 1942.

G. Hodges, ace forward. Hodges is a fine passer, excellent shot and guides his team with poise not usually found in a high school athlete.”

The summer after Hodges graduated, he played well enough in the American Legion state baseball tournament to receive an offer from the Detroit Tigers in its minor-league system. After discussing the offer with his father, Hodges decided his skills probably were not good enough to make a living at that level of professional baseball and chose to accept a scholarship at Saint Joseph College, a Catholic school in Rensselaer, Indiana. Here he hoped to fulfill his dream of becoming a teacher and basketball coach.

Hodges entered college in the fall of 1939, but as a freshman he was not allowed to play varsity basketball. He did have an immediate impact on the varsity football and baseball teams while also joining the U.S. Marine Corps Reserve Officer

Training Corps program. That summer Hodges played baseball in the Indianapolis Amateur Baseball Association league for the P. R. Mallory Company, returning to Saint Joseph for his sophomore year. Skipping football, he got to play in the game he loved, basketball, at the varsity level. Big and rawboned, Hodges both handled the ball in the backcourt and aggressively grabbed rebounds. Even after he finally moved to baseball as a career, he always touted the idea of playing in a basketball league in the winter to keep in top shape. Hodges’s sophomore year basketball performance at Saint Joseph was lackluster, perhaps impacted by the coming war and the fact that several players had already dropped out and joined the military.

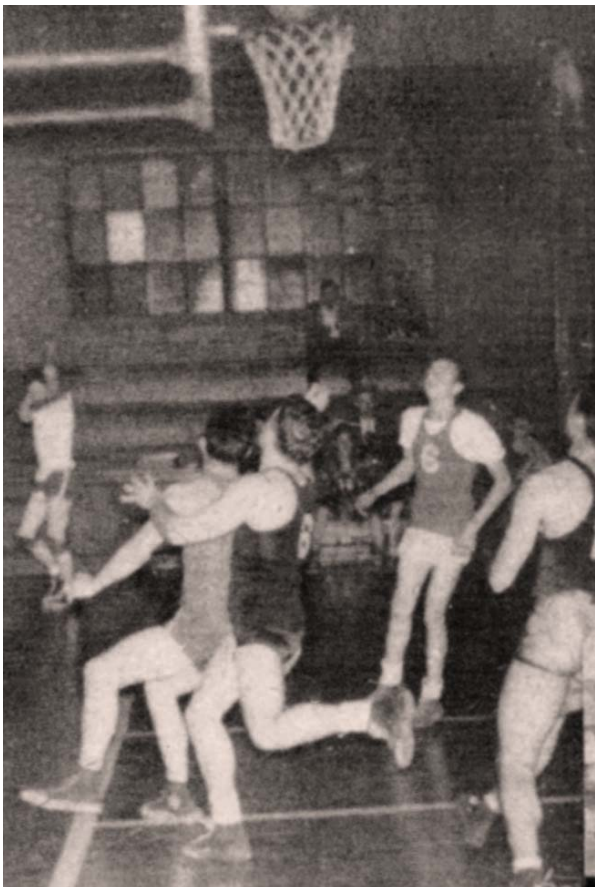
Hodges’s ROTC commitment meant he would be called up by the Marine Corps in the fall of 1943. Meanwhile, he played baseball in Indianapolis again that summer, performing so well he was

invited to a tryout camp in New York City for the Brooklyn Dodgers. Hodges’s wife, Joan, related in 2012 that her husband was quite surprised at the offer, thinking he was not good enough to play professional baseball. “Basketball was his sport,” she recalled. “Gil thought he was going to play professional basketball and then maybe coach baseball.”

Hodges was thrilled when Dodgers general manager and president Branch Rickey offered him a \$1,000 bonus to sign, half of it to be paid when

he returned from the military. Hodges got in to play one game in the big leagues late that summer before he was off to the Marine Corps. He did not play especially well in the game and once more doubted his chances of making a living as a baseball player. Meanwhile, he was destined to lose three of his prime years serving in the Pacific theater during the war. While he never shared much information about his time overseas, those who knew him best thought him much more somber when he returned home.

While Hodges faced several twists and turns in his young life in the pre- and post-World War II years, tiny Oakland City College faced its own critical problems during this same period. For years, the college had produced the great majority of teachers, school administrators, and public-school coaches in southwest Indiana. Throughout the 1920s and early 1930s the popular area college also had a lively sports program with its teams, nicknamed the Oaks. The college fielded successful squads in basketball, football, baseball, and track, playing smaller colleges in the state, such as Hanover and Evansville Colleges, along with such larger schools as Indiana State Teachers College (today Indiana State University) and Ball State. This golden age abruptly ended with the Stock Market crash and the Great Depression, and the school almost collapsed. In 1930 the college’s president, William Dearing, in an important announcement to the college community via the school newspaper, lamented, “The world was never in such a turmoil in the memory of living men. But we must live and carry on. Education must



An Oakland City Oaks game in the team’s home gymnasium during the 1948–49 season.



PRINCETON DAILY CLARION

Clockwise from Top: The Oaks 1948–49 super team with future National Basketball Association player Bob Lochmeuller (front row, fourth from left) and Gil Hodges (front row, far right); The Famous Red Heads, a semiprofessional women's team Hodges played against when he was on Oakland City's basketball squad; and team captain Hodges with Babs Hayes, the school's homecoming queen. Hodges shook her hand rather than give her the traditional kiss on the cheek.



ALON ALEXANDER / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Hodges waits on deck for his turn at the plate during a spring training game pitting the Los Angeles Dodgers against the Boston Red Sox, circa March 1958, Vero Beach, Florida. For the 1958 season, Hodges won a gold glove award for defensive excellence at first base.

go forward in spite of hardships. . . . We invite the students and faculty of Oakland City College to unite in common fellowship of suffering.”

The school was just beginning to crawl out of the lingering shadow of the Depression in the early 1940s when the war brought another drastic drop—80 percent—in student enrollment in 1942. All sports programs were canceled that year for the duration of the war. Things grew so desperate that the new college president, James Cox, made a remarkable emergency announcement in the school newspaper in the fall of 1943. Responding to rumors that the long-standing institution would close, Cox said: “Administrative officials have considered the difficulties under which the college will be forced to operate if it opens this fall. However, it was felt by the administration that they owed it to the institution and to the students who plan to attend O.C.C. to not close its doors, unlike other small colleges.”

Just in time, in 1946, the college’s enrollment swelled, with old and new students returning in droves, many using the GI Bill. The Oakland City College Veterans Association was founded in that same year and quickly grew to be the largest organization on campus. The ever-growing number of veterans were in some cases a loud, cardplaying, smoking, rough-talking lot, a new force to be absorbed into the college’s traditional conservative culture. But accommodate they did—a new recreational lounge was soon set up in the basement of the administration building where vets could smoke, talk, and play cards, and the college bought a nearby house as a residence for returning servicemen and servicewomen. Still left in tatters during this resurgence of students, however, were the college’s once proud sports programs.

The college hired U.S. Army Air Corps veteran Delbert Disler as its new basketball coach in 1946 and gave him the

seemingly impossible task of resurrecting the institution's sports program. Disler, who was quickly given the moniker of "Chief," forged ahead, putting together a team of mostly returning veterans who had dropped out in 1942 to fight in the war. The results, however, were ugly—the Oaks won only two out of twelve games in their collegiate conference that year. The next year looked even rougher, with Disler putting together a tough schedule that included Indiana State and Evansville College, the latter an archrival before the war. Even the school newspaper lamented that the schedule "was pretty tough."

At the beginning of his second year as coach, Disler issued a stern warning to any players going out for basketball, explaining that his pet peeve "was an athlete who fell down scholastically." This seemed to be directed at veterans who might think they would be getting a pass when playing for his team. As it turned out, most would. That same year the Chief was made the sponsor and faculty adviser for the school's Veterans Organization. Disler soon drew close to the veterans, cutting them slack if he thought it was needed. Returning veteran and basketball player Harry Goerlitz remembered Disler as "lots of fun, particularly when we all played poker. He was sensitive to the trauma many had experi-

enced in war. . . . If it hadn't been for him, I'm sure a lot of the guys would have given up and quit the team and school."

In October 1947 the *Collegian*, the school newspaper, announced on its sports page that Disler had selected twelve players for his A team squad for the 1947–48 season. Just before the college's first game, the sportswriter optimistically noted, "The college has just about everything needed for a winning season." As it turned out, the reporter had been too optimistic, Oakland City lost three out of its first four games, including an 87–36 drubbing by Indiana State. It did not help matters that fans were not showing up at the college gym to cheer on the Oaks, leading the *Collegian* editor to bemoan, "There are no cheery yells to meet those of the opposition, and to spur the Oaks on to victory. There is plenty of room, however, on the O. C. C. bleachers, for only a few have come to root for their team." Another newspaper piece noted the chemistry of the team "was not quite right." Something seemed to be missing. Then, at the beginning of the college's winter term, the missing piece showed up.

Hodges's first year as a major leaguer in 1946–47 had been underwhelming. Rickey had indicated in a rather subtle way that Hodges had a future in baseball but kept him as a third-string catcher. Hodges, however, ruminated on his dismal .156 batting average and the fact he still could not hit a major-league curveball. Still remembering his father's strict admonition that his sons would never work in the Indiana coal mines, Hodges went to plan B, moving in with his parents in Petersburg, Indiana, and faithfully driving the fifteen miles each day to attend classes at Oakland City. Hodges's new

game plan was really his prewar one—become a high school teacher and coach.

Besides Oakland City's closeness appealing to Hodges, he had probably read the college's frequently published newspaper advertisement about going to school there to become a teacher. This advertisement touted the decent salary, retirement benefits, and community status a teacher received at that time. The piece touted that the typical teacher salary was \$2,500 "for a nine-month contract."

Oakland City records show that Hodges majored in social studies and physical education, a definite sign he wished to teach and coach in high school. Interestingly, *Collegian* sportswriter, Jack Copeland, wrote a piece about Hodges's sudden appearance on the team that suggested he really was shifting to becoming a teacher and a high-school coach. "Gilbert R. Hodges, of Petersburg, *formerly* [italics mine] with the Brooklyn Dodgers, has enrolled at O. C. C." Meanwhile, Hodges's presence at the first game he played as an Oak had an immediate impact. The *Collegian* reported, "Gil Hodges, the Brooklyn Dodger catcher, was very much 'the man on the floor.' Just about everything he did was right. He scored when a score was needed very badly, rebounded well, and manipulated the ball like a charm." The local paper, the *Oakland City Journal*, added to this praise, noting, "The entire team looked very good, and it would be hard to pick one player and call him the star of the game. But if that had to be done, the vote would go to Gil Hodges. He was all over the floor—working the ball in toward the basket, rebounding in amazing fashion, and coming through with a field goal or free throw when it was needed most."

Other Indiana papers carried similar stories. The *Kokomo Tribune* declared, "Oakland City uncovered a freshman star in Gil Hodges, who was third string catcher for the Brooklyn Dodgers last sea-

From the beginning of Hodges's professional baseball career, local newspapers often carried photographs touting his progress. This one, from the Princeton Daily Clarion, is from his so-so rookie season with the Brooklyn Dodgers.

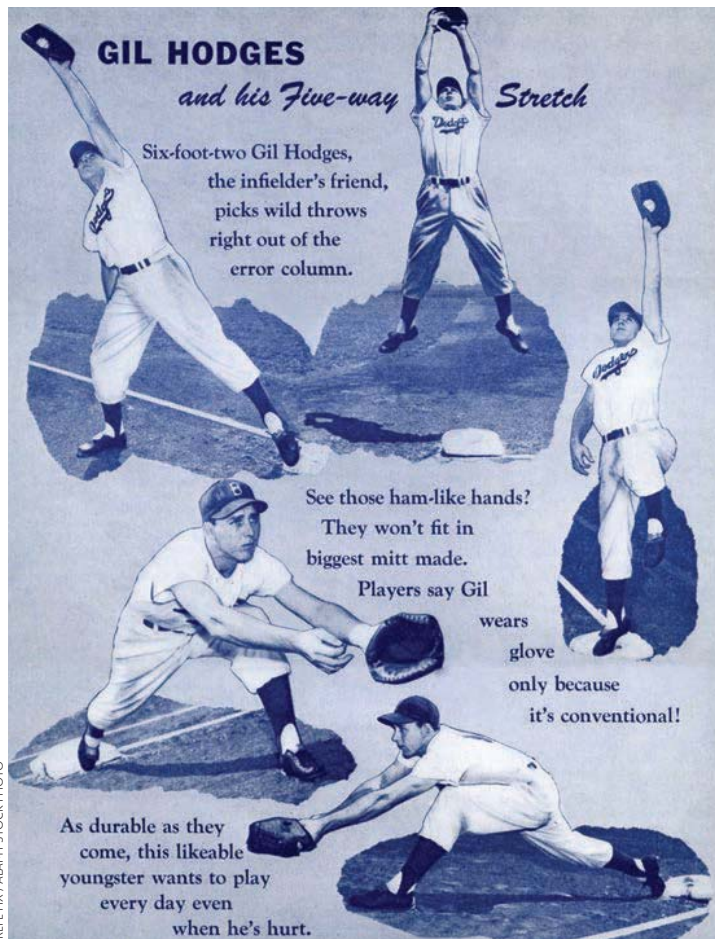


son.” The event even made news across the country. Under the bold heading, “Dodger’s Catcher Paces Cage Victory,” the *Des Moines Register* reported, “Gil Hodges of Petersburg, Ind., third-string catcher for the Brooklyn Dodgers last summer and now a freshman at Oakland City College, led the Oaks to a 66–56 victory.”

The initial excitement did not last long, as the Oaks proceeded to lose their next three games. The losses, however, were to strong teams: Indiana Central, Evansville College, and Shurtleff College. Hodges continued to perform well, leading the Oaks in scoring in the Shurtleff game and making key plays in the others. Then came what seemed a turning point in the season. At the Oakland City basketball homecoming, the entire starting five suddenly jelled as a team, toppling Centre College 70–53. In the next game, the Oaks lost by three to a strong Transylvania College squad. Hodges was the game’s leading scorer. He then rallied his team in the last three minutes of the next game to lead the Oaks over Hanover, 51–47, the *Indianapolis Star Press* noting, “Oakland City’s Gil Hodges, the Brooklyn Dodger, hit two quick baskets, to put the Oaks ahead.” The *Collegian* gleefully pointed out, “The Panthers seemed to think they had the game won even before they came down, but, despite a hard-fought battle, they were speedily disillusioned by Coach Disler’s boys.”

Perhaps the Oaks’ and Hodges’s toughest loss that year, by a single point, was to a strong Franklin College team. Hodges almost pulled the game out of the fire. The *Journal* reported, “With only a few seconds remaining to be played in the game and the Oaks behind 47–42, Hodges hit two long one-handed shots from out in the floor to close the gap to one point. The Oaks got one last shot, one that rimmed in and out when the gun sounded.” Hodges again led the Oaks in scoring in the loss.

While Hodges settled into the rhythms



REFLEX / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

of college life, his all-around presence on the basketball floor and the Oaks’ growing successes lifted the once-struggling campus. As more wins came, so did the fans and their enthusiasm, the latter aspect noted by the editor of the *Collegian*, who wrote, “Keep up the good work fans.” With four games left in the season, the school newspaper reported that Hodges was the leading scorer for the Oaks. The team would go on to win its last five games, for a final record of 9–10, and Hodges would be applauded for his scoring, as well as his “magnificent” floor play and rebounding. This level of play is made more astounding by a chance discovery.

Perhaps one of the most interesting finds in this research involved the amazing number of independent basketball games Hodges played his first season at Oakland City for the Miller’s Tavern team out of Princeton, Indiana. Such independent games were fast-paced, rough contests that

easily wore a player out. In one instance, he played with an independent all-star team against a well-known women’s traveling team, “The Famous Red Head Professionals.” Bud Miskell, sportswriter for the *Princeton Daily Clarion*, thought Hodges an amazing workhorse, “playing the past basketball season with Miller’s Tavern. One game wasn’t enough to keep Gil in training however so many times during the week he would fill in for several other independent fives. Many weeks he played as many as five games.” Miskell did not mention Hodges’s collegiate endeavors.

All of the games Hodges played, independent and college, may help explain the grades he made at Oakland City during the winter term he attended in the 1947–48 college basketball season: English 122, C; History 234, C; Sociology 101, C; and Physical Education 202, A. Not surprisingly, Disler taught the physical education class.

Left: A page from the Brooklyn Dodgers’ 1951 newsletter, Line Drives, shows how the six-foot, two-inch tall Hodges stretches to haul in throws while holding down first base for his team. Opposite, Below: Jackie Robinson (left) celebrates with teammates Preacher Roe and Hodges following the team’s 1–0 victory over the New York Yankees in the second game of the 1949 World Series. Roe pitched a nine-inning shutout and Hodges drove in Robinson for the only run of the game.

Hodges, along with Disler and the other Oaks basketball players, had wrought a subtle miracle in the 1947–48 season, resurrecting the school's basketball culture. The college gym, with just a handful of quiet spectators at the beginning of the year, saw a full house, with boisterous, cheering fans by the season's end. However, no one knew for sure if Hodges would continue working on his degree the next year. In the spring of 1948, an article appeared in the *Collegian* that gave some hint to the possibility that Hodges might still be in the running as a professional baseball player. Certainly, all his playing basketball in Indiana meant he came back

in great shape for spring training. The article noted:

Gil Hodges, Oakland City College junior, who left at the end of the winter term to resume playing professional baseball, is now the first string catcher for the Brooklyn Dodgers. Following recent workouts, Leo Durocher, Dodgers manager, praised Hodges highly and stated that he might start the season with him as regular catcher. The Dodgers are on their way back to Brooklyn via Florida, where they had a nine day tour scheduled.

Hodges's sports career was of great interest to Oaks basketball fans. The *Collegian* sportswriter, following national

newspaper reports, noted in June 1948 that Hodges's job at the catcher position might be in danger. He did so by quoting Rickey, who stated that the team would keep Hodges, "if he was ready to hit curve ball pitching." Then, in July, the school paper reported that Hodges had been moved to first base by the Dodgers, a position at which he would eventually thrive. The *Collegian's* sports editor, however, must have felt something was still not right, predicting Hodges would be back in the winter for the next Oakland City basketball season.

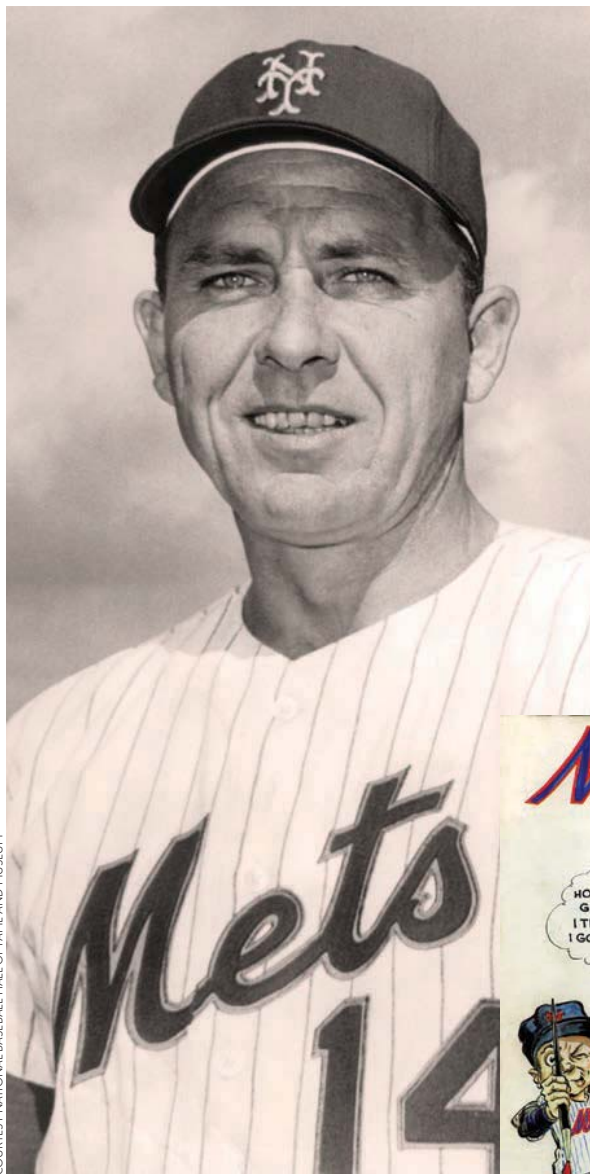
Hodges 1948 baseball season was indeed a mixed bag. At the beginning



there was tremendous pressure, as Dodger manager Leo Durocher announced, “I said the first day of spring training Gil Hodges would be my first baseman. . . . No first baseman in the league can replace Hodges if he hits.” The season started out well enough and kept getting better. The Indiana native had the third highest number of home runs in the majors and played first base with amazing finesse, as if he had played the position forever. Then September came and his batting average plummeted. At an end of the 1948 baseball season, the Dodgers emphasized that the team would be looking for a first baseman who could hit, and Hodges returned to Oakland City that fall to sign up for more classes and to play another year of basketball for Disler. Becoming a teacher and coach was still a real possibility.

If Hodges harbored any hopes of playing professional basketball after his 1947–48 successes with the Oaks, those hopes were surely tempered by the team’s 1948–49 basketball season. The Oaks’ previously fruitful year had attracted a bumper crop of new and solid recruits, including the one thing the team had been missing the year before, a big man with strong scoring skills to match Hodges’s rebounding and ball-handling abilities. Disler had brought in just the player with Elberfeld, Indiana’s lanky six foot-five Bob Lochmueller. The gifted Lochmueller would later transfer to the University of Louisville and would have a short career in the National Basketball Association.

The 1948–49 season was still made enjoyable for Hodges, however, by an event that took the college community by surprise—his marriage to Brooklyn native Joan Lombardi in late November, an event announced on national news by reporter Walter Winchell. The couple moved into a small apartment at the edge of the campus, and Joan soon became her husband’s biggest, and often, loudest fan, the latter caus-

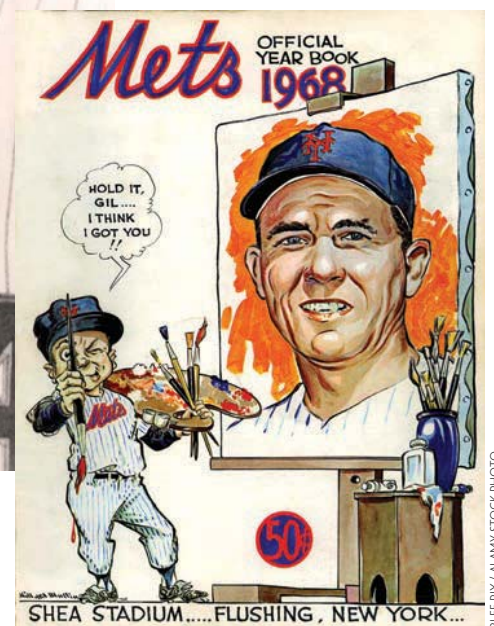


COURTESY NATIONAL BASEBALL HALL OF FAME AND MUSEUM

ing her in-laws to suggest she tone down her comments to game officials whenever they made calls against her husband. Another change from the year before was that Hodges played little, if any, independent basketball. Joan remembered the year as one of the most pleasant of their marriage.

Despite being loaded with solid players, Disler’s squad lost its first two games, but roared back to win nine games in a row, ending the season with one of the best Oaks campaigns ever with a record of 13–5. Lochmueller ran away with the scoring title, Hodges notching fourth place. Still Hodges was often recognized for his rugged rebounding and “exceptional defensive” play. His overall leadership was further recognized when he was chosen

Left: Hodges became manager of the New York Mets in 1968, leading the team to a World Series victory the next year over the favored Baltimore Orioles. Before managing the Mets, he served five seasons as the manager of the Washington Senators. Below: New manager Hodges graced the cover of the Mets’ 1968 yearbook.



RILEY PIX / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

as the team captain. One iconic event occurred that is often mentioned about Hodges’s time at Oakland City. At the homecoming game his last year, Hodges, as team captain, was to place the tiara on the head of the homecoming queen, Babs Hayes, and give her a kiss on the cheek. Instead, Hodges shook her hand.

Just as the Oaks’ season ended, Hodges received some good news. Rickey traveled to nearby Evansville to personally talk about the terms of Hodges’s next contract with the Dodgers. Hodges, after signing, left immediately for spring training, the

college letting him complete his classes “through correspondence.”

Hodges would once again be the Dodgers’ first baseman, and it was rumored his pay surpassed \$10,000, several times more than the \$2,500 he might have earned as a high-school teacher. Such a contract also greatly reassured Hodges that he would likely remain in the ma-

jor leagues and not have to worry about finishing a college degree—that is, if his hitting improved. A headline that summer in the Princeton, Indiana, newspaper told the tale: “Gil Hodges Now Hitting .324.”

Hodges’s final grades at Oakland City suggested his baseball success was probably a good thing. He received a C in History 121, a B in three physical-education

classes, and had incomplete grades for Education 223 and Geography 102. His time at the Hoosier college, however, was not wasted. It gave Hodges the opportunity to play basketball, a game that was his first love, while also trying to figure out his future. In the process, he made important contributions to the sports culture there, helping, along with Disler, to resurrect a sports program that had been completely shut down by the loss of so many students during World War II. Just as important, from the two years that Hodges played would come many successful teachers, coaches, and administrators for Indiana and regional schools. It is a forgotten story that deserves to be remembered.

An Indiana and Midwest historian and author, Randy Mills has written more than eighty articles for professional journals and nine books on several historical subjects. In 2018 he was the recipient of the Indiana Historical Society’s Dorothy Riker Hoosier Historian Award. In November 2019 Rose-Dog Books released Mills’s latest work, An Almost Perfect Season, A Father and Son and a Golden Age of Small-Town High School Basketball. •



A 1956 photograph shows Hodges relaxing with his family at their Brooklyn home. The family includes Barbara, four, front, and from left: Cindy, age nine; Irene, fourteen; Gilly, fifteen; and Jean Hodges. Gilly, a first baseman like his father, played on his high school team.

FOR FURTHER READING

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