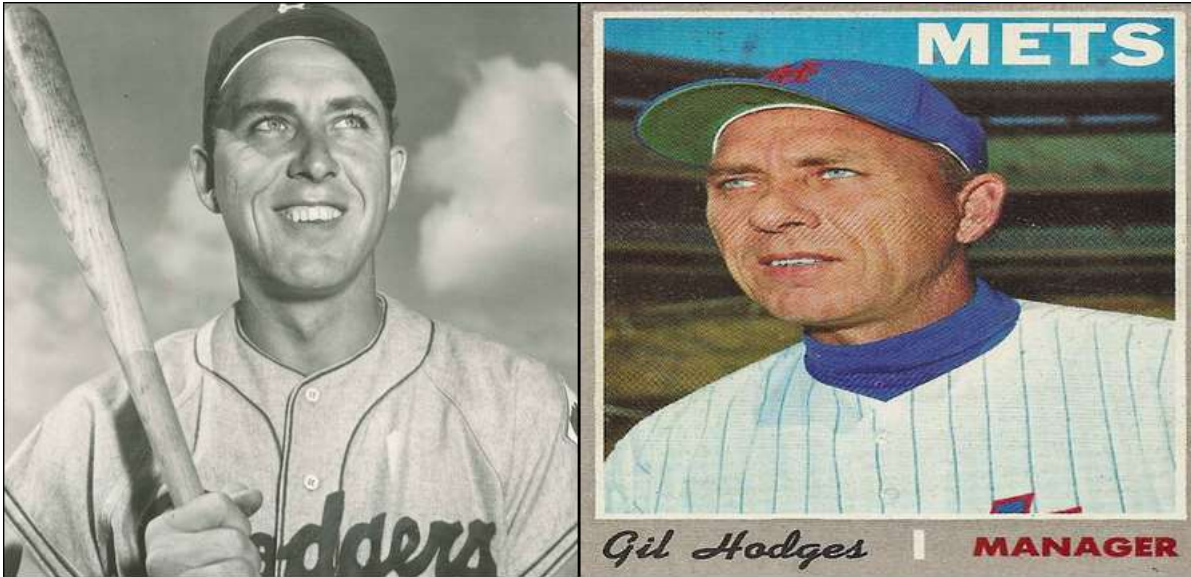


Gil Hodges: 351 HR, 1,119 RBI, 1,921 Hits, .292 AVG, .378 OBP, .534 SLG, .846 OPS, 58.7 WAR



When Gil Hodges retired during the 1963 season, he was 11th on the all-time list of home runs with 370. Only Hall of Famers Babe Ruth, Jimmie Foxx, Ted Williams, Mel Ott, Lou Gehrig, Stan Musial, Eddie Mathews, Mickey Mantle, Willie Mays and Duke Snider had clubbed more. During the 12 years that he was a full-time player (1948-1959), only Duke Snider hit more home runs, only Stan Musial drove in more runs and only Snider and Musial scored more. During these years, he was by far the best offensive and defensive first baseman during this time, leading all first sackers in home runs, runs batted in, runs scored, and hits, all by wide margins. Among other first basemen, He also was that era's leader in the sabermetric statistics WAR and Runs Created, and was second by one just point in OPS+ to Ted Kluszewski. Gold Glove Awards were not assigned until 1957. When they were, Hodges won the honor in each of his three full seasons of play.

Hodges was an 8-time All-Star and one of the best and most respected members of the Boys of Summer Brooklyn Dodgers dynasty of the 1950's. He was the key offensive contributor to the 1955 team that finally ended the "maybe next year" refrain by defeating those Damn Yankees in Game 7. He was the key offensive contributor for the Los Angeles Dodgers as they captured their first title in 1959 just two years after switching coasts. And ten years later, back amongst the five boroughs in New York City, he led the Miracle Mets as their manager to their improbable '69 World Championship over the 109-win Baltimore Orioles.

But Gil Hodges is not in the Hall of Fame, having paid the role of Cooperstown bridesmaid more than any player in the history of baseball. Tomorrow in San Diego when the 16-member "Golden Era" committee renders the latest verdict on Hodges' illustrious career, we will learn whether, after a 46-year wait, the fans and family of this great baseball man will learn if "maybe next year" is finally this year for his induction into Cooperstown.

When Gil Hodges first hit the BBWAA's Hall of Fame ballot in winter of 1968-69, he debuted with 24% of the vote out of the necessary 75% needed for induction. Stan Musial was a first-time nominee on the ballot with Hodges that year and coasted to Cooperstown with 93% of the vote. A great many writers at the time reserved their first ballot votes only for true legends of the game so, at the time, it was common for 2nd-tier Hall of Fame candidates to have low opening tallies. The other two key players making their first ballot appearances were Early Wynn (who received 28% of the vote) and Red Schoendienst (19%). Both Wynn and Schoendienst were eventually inducted into the Hall.

The next year, benefitting from the publicity of his managerial success with the Mets, Hodges' vote total doubled to 48%. Meanwhile, teammate Duke Snider debuted on the ballot with only 17% of the vote, a total significantly less than Hodges' started with the year before. The Duke of Flatbush, always in the shadow of the other New York centerfielders from the '50's (Willie Mays and Mickey Mantle) had to wait until 1980 but eventually was recognized for his great career.

Hodges' vote ticked up to 50% with the 1971 vote but dropped to 40% when Sandy Koufax gobbled up 87% of the ballots in his first try. One of the noticeable trends in the history of the Hall of Fame balloting is that writers compare players to others at their position or others on the same team. This is sensible of course but sometimes causes voters to change their minds based on the accomplishments of one player who has nothing to do with the other (such as Koufax and Hodges).

Anyway, Hodges would never see his teammate Koufax enter the Hall. Hodges passed away in 1972, collapsing after a round of golf on Easter Sunday. As often happens because of the psychology of the human brain, Hodges received a "death bump" in the BBWAA Hall of Fame balloting, climbing to 57% in the following election. Only once since then did he dip below 50% of the votes (49% in 1982 when Hank Aaron and Frank Robinson overwhelmed the ballot).

In those 15 years on the ballot, Hodges received 3,010 out of a possible 5,660 votes (53%). He is the only player in the history of the sport to receive a 15-year majority vote but still be waiting outside the hallowed Hall. Only Jack Morris comes close, having closed out his 15-year run with an overall vote total of 42%, finishing with 61% in his final year of torture.

In 11 out of the 15 years that he was on the BBWAA ballot, Hodges received more than 50% of the writers' vote, maxing out at 63% in his final year of eligibility. In his final 14 years on the ballot there was not a single player who gained more votes than Gil Hodges who did not eventually gain entry into the Hall of Fame. A super-majority (75%) rule is a good starting place, but shouldn't there be a point where majority rules?

Hodges earned the simple majority (more than 50%) of the vote 11 times. Just for laughs, compare this to the other 8 players on this year's Golden Era ballot. The total number of 50% votes earned on the BBWAA ballots by Allen, Oliva, Minoso, Boyer, Wills, Tiant, Kaat and Pierce was zero, zip, nada.

I'm not suggesting that Gil Hodges should get the nod from the Golden Era committee simply because he gained vastly more writers' votes than the others during his career, but I do believe that deserves special attention and consideration because of it.

Besides being the dominant first baseman of his era, Hodges was a significant contributor to two World Series championships and also multiple pennants by the Dodgers. This is a big deal. If you look at his overall numbers, they are just average. In 151 plate appearances, he had a middling .761 OPS. This is skewed by a truly miserable 1952 series in which he went 0-for-21. If George Steinbrenner had owned the '52 Dodgers, Hodges might have been dubbed Mr. May. But in the four Fall Classics since then, Hodges hit .337 with a OPS of .915, including 4 HR and 16 RBI.

These results are highlighted by the following notable achievements in his last three October forays, detailed below.

- Hit a 2-run HR off Don Larsen in Game 4 of the 1955 series, giving Brooklyn a 4-3 lead, helping the "Bums" tie the series at 2 games each.
- In Game 7 of the 1955 series, Hodges was responsible for both RBI in a 2-0 win as "next year" finally became "this year" for the Dodgers.
- Hodges was the dominant force in the first two games of the 1962 series, clubbing a 3-run HR off Whitey Ford in Game 1 and driving in 4 runs in Game 2. The Dodgers won both games but lost the series due to Don Larsen's perfect game in Game 5 and a Game 7 shellacking where the team lost 9-0. (Incidentally, in Larsen's perfect game, Hodges was robbed of two hits by brilliant defensive plays from Mickey Mantle and Andy Carey).
- With the Dodgers now in Los Angeles for the 1959 series against the White Sox, Hodges hit a tie-breaking solo home run in the bottom of the 8th to lead L.A. to a 5-4 victory, a 3-1 series lead and an eventual championship.

Besides his statistical accomplishments, which look less special in 2014 but were in the upper echelon when he retired, Hodges was a true team leader, evidenced by the fact that, at the end of his playing career (with the Mets in May of 1963), the Washington Senators traded Jimmy Piersall to the Mets so that they could instantly install Hodges as their manager.

The Senators were an expansion team in 1961 and still really bad in 1963 but he did improve the team from 62 to 70 to 71 to 76 wins in his 3+ years at the helm. At the end of the 1967 season, the Mets were impressed enough to trade a pitcher and \$100,000 to get Hodges back to skipper their team starting in 1968. The Mets won just 61 games in 1967; in '68, with Hodges at the helm, they improved to 73 wins. The 1969 edition have been dubbed the "Miracle Mets" because, under Hodges'

leadership, they skyrocketed to 100 wins and beat the juggernaut Baltimore Orioles to win the World Series.

In his endorsement for Hodges' Hall of Fame candidacy, *Sports Illustrated's* Tom Verducci notes that Hodges deserves credit for outmaneuvering Earl Weaver in the series, brilliantly platooning his players (a strategy Weaver would later adopt) and help to popularize the five-man rotation as a template for how to handle young pitchers.

Hodges' record as a manager was technically not relevant to the 15-year writers' vote but is germane to this Golden Era ballot, where he's being compared not only to eight other players but also to former Cardinals and Reds General Manager Bob Howsam. The entire baseball resume can and should be considered here.

On the field, if you want to compare Hodges' statistics to the other first baseman on the ballot (Dick Allen), Hodges loses on "rate" statistics like OPS (by a significant margin) but wins on career statistics like total HR and RBI because he played a little longer. It's my opinion that anybody considering the two men should ask these two questions:

1. What is more important, putting up big numbers or winning?

I think almost any baseball player would say that winning isn't just everything, it's the only thing. Now, to be fair, Hodges had the benefit of playing on a dynastic team, chock full of Hall of Famers like Koufax, Drysdale, Snider, Campanella, Reese and Jackie Robinson. Allen's teams were not nearly at that level but he was on three different teams (the 1964 Phillies, 1971 Dodgers, and the 1976 Phillies) that came within a whisker or did make it to the postseason. In Allen's one post-season appearance with Philadelphia, he created problems in the clubhouse and his team was swept in 3 games by the Cincinnati Reds in the League Championship Series, which leads to question #2.

2. If you could go back in history, had an otherwise championship caliber team and could choose to add either Gil Hodges or Dick Allen to your lineup and clubhouse, who would you choose?

This is not a simple question to answer and of course I'm not the best one to answer it but it seems to me that, if you surveyed players, managers and executives who knew both men, the survey results would be pretty lopsided in Hodges' favor.

As I wrote in the earlier post on Dick Allen, I would be happy to see him in the Hall of Fame. He was truly one of the game's most prolific hitters. I just need more longevity and more than a gaudy OPS number to put him in the Hall over players with more complete resumes as both players and teammates. In Part 3 of this series, I'll take a much briefer look at the 8 other candidates on the Golden Era ballot.

Earlier in this article, I made the point that Gil Hodges gained by more Hall of Fame votes by the writers than any of the other eight players on the Golden Era ballot.

So, if you're curious, this chart shows the votes earned by each of the nine player nominees on the Golden Era ballot and also the maximum percentage they achieved during their years on the ballot.

<u>Player</u>	<u>Votes</u>	<u>Best 1-year%</u>
Gil Hodges	3,010	63.4%
Tony Oliva	2,138	47.3%
Maury Wills	1,680	40.6%
Jim Kaat	1,591	29.6%
Dick Allen	1,027	18.9%
Minnie Minoso	957	21.1%
Luis Tiant	918	30.9%
Ken Boyer	836	25.2%
Billy Pierce	24	1.9%