

## GIL HODGES

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**FEEN-A-MINT.**

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Mrs. Joan Hodges and children (Cynthia and Irene shown here) meant more to Gil Hodges than homers, as last season's hitting proved.

Last year Brooklyn's hero was Los Angeles' goat; that's changed now, thanks to a homesick wife who made a sacrifice

by Ed Fitzgerald

THEY THOUGHT Gil Hodges was through after last year. He was one of the biggest names and brightest stars of the colorful Dodgers who had moved from Brooklyn to Los Angeles but, like the ball club itself, he had flopped miserably in his new surroundings.

The best he could do was hit .259, a 40-point drop from his average of the year before, and he had suffered the humiliation of seeing his job taken from him by a raw rookie.

Even more painful was the way the fans climbed on him. It seemed as though they were picking him as scapegoat for their disappointment in the highly advertised Dodgers, who skidded to seventh place in California. Gil couldn't understand it; in Brooklyn, the fans had always loved him. Once, when he was battling a terrific slump, Father Herbert Redmond, saying Mass at St. Francis Xavier Church in Brooklyn, told his flock: "It's too hot for a sermon. Go home, keep the Commandments and say a prayer for Gil Hodges." That was the way it used to be.

But worst of all for family-man Gil Hodges, whose wife and three children mean more to him than anything else, was the fact that things were as bad at home as on the field. Gil's wife, Joan, is a Brooklyn girl and, although Gil comes from Indiana, he was happy to settle down in a house in Brooklyn after their marriage in 1948. It was pleasant for Joan because her own family was nearby, and her mother and sister dropped in almost every day. When Gil went on the road with the ball club, Joan wasn't alone.

But in California, everything was

different. Joan felt uprooted, and when Gil was on a long trip, she felt desperately alone. She was unhappy and dissatisfied, and Gil suffered with her.

Gil was only 35 years old, in perfect condition, but apparently he was all washed up. He wasn't meeting the ball well, he killed one Dodger rally after another by striking out or popping up, and he tried so many cures for his batting failures that he became hopelessly confused at the plate. He had lost confidence, and it was clear that unless something drastic was done, Gil Hodges' great career was going to end.

It was Joan who seized upon the solution. Nobody knows better than she that Gil isn't the kind of husband and father who can forget about his family when he goes off to work. Little Gilly, Irene and Cynthia are his pets, and there is nothing he wouldn't do for Joan. Once he refused to report to spring training until their first child was born. Another time he jumped the club during training and flew home without permission to make sure Joan was all right after Cynthia was born. It stood to reason that if Joan was miserable, Gil was going to be, too.

"I realized that I'd been hurting Gil, acting the way I was and carrying on so," Joan says, "and I made up my mind that the best thing I could do for him was to stay home all summer."

"Home," for the Hodges family, is still Brooklyn. So Joan and the kids stayed with Gil during spring training, as is their custom, and then, for the first time, said goodbye to Daddy and went north to Flatbush while he flew west with the Dodgers.

By midseason Gil Hodges, reestablished as the regular first-baseman of the ball club, was hitting close to .300, walloping home runs at his old-time rate and breaking up ball games with the key hit in the clutch.

Gil has never been a high-average hitter. In 10 full seasons in Brooklyn, he got over .300 only twice, hitting .302 in 1953 and .304 the next year. But ever since he played high-school ball in Petersburg, Ind., and later at St. Joseph's College near home, he has been able to generate tremendous power. He went into the 1959 season with 320 home runs and with seven years of 100 or more runs-batted-in. That's power hitting. Gil takes a full cut at the pitch and his thickly muscled shoulders and arms are capable of driving the ball out of sight if he gets even a fair piece of it. On the night of Aug. 31, 1950, at Ebbets Field, he smashed four home runs in a single game against the Braves, throwing the stands into such a turmoil that Joan closed her eyes when he swung for the fourth one.

SIX-FEET, one-and-a-half inches tall, 200 pounds of solid bone and muscle, Gil is regarded by his fellow ball players as one of the strongest men in the game. He has hands like hams. "Gil doesn't really need a glove to play first base," Pee Wee Reese jokes, "He just wears one because it's fashionable." It was this sheer physical power of Gil's that made it so hard for baseball people to believe he didn't have it any more. But the important thing was that Gil didn't believe it,