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Born in the shadow of Ebbets Field, yearning to be a Yankee, he wound up as a New York Giant star

Sid batted .299 and smacked out 30 homeruns in the 1948 season.

"the KID from BROOKLYN"

by Milton Richman

A CAPRICIOUS gust of wind kidnaped Hank Sauer's high pop foul and sent it spinning suddenly downward over the third base box seats at the Polo Grounds. Sid Gordon of the Giants, shading his eyes from the sun, ran straight for the stands, reached adroitly above the customers' heads and grabbed the ball for the putout. Unable to keep his balance, the New York third baseman lost his footing and tumbled half-way over the railing.

When Gordon extricated himself uninjured, manager Leo Durocher nudged one of his coaches and remarked:

"Some guys in this league out-hit Gordon but nobody out-hustles him."

And that statement, boys and girls, forms virtually the sum and substance of the finest third-sacker to perform in Giant spangles since the heroic hey-days of Freddie Lindstrom and Johnny Vergez. Gordon, a chunky, sad-eyed slugger, who was born and bred in Brooklyn, frequently has been accused of being Durocher's "favorite player." Whether or not there is any truth to the charge—and Durocher's conversation seems to indicate that there is—ample reason can be found for such a selection by Leo.

When the Lip succeeded Mel Ott as manager of the Giants last July, he inherited a club famed for its power and notorious for its pitching deficiencies. After piloting the team for three weeks, during which time it bogged down at the plate, Durocher complained:

"They told me I was getting a bunch of hitters when I came over here from Brooklyn. So far I've seen only one—Gordon!"

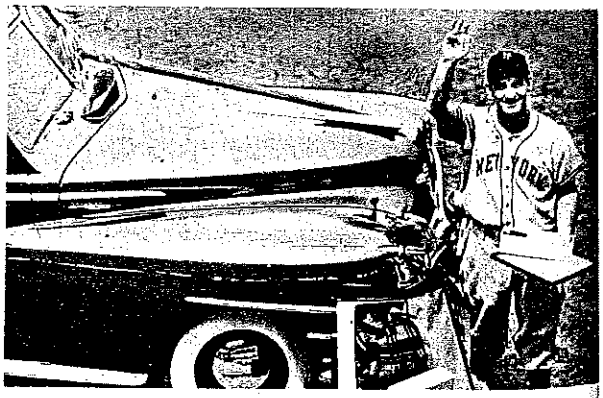
Johnny Mize and Walker Cooper popularly are regarded to be the loudest guns in the Giants' arsenal, but when the final 1948 figures were totalled it was Gordon who emerged as the team's outstanding hitter. His batting average of .299 was seven points higher than that of Mize, the Giants' second leading hitter, and Sid's 30 homeruns ranked him behind only such slugging stalwarts as Stan Musial, Ralph Kiner, Sauer and Mize in the National League. Only three players in the circuit were able to better Gordon's total of 107 runs-batted-in. Those figures could have much to do with Durocher's alleged favoritism. And if that's not enough, listen to Leo:

"The guy (Gordon) loves to play ball. He can't get enough of it. He's a born (*Continued on page 80*)

Never really a long ball hitter, Gordon became one. He has 57 homers on his record now.

Sid, a part-timer in the Giant outfield, compiled 107 runs-batted-in. With Whitey Lockman and Bobby Thomson the total was an even 230.

Sid collected gifts galore on Gordon Day at Brooklyn's Ebbets Field, then homered twice.



new Giants' hero

All photos by Acme

SID GORDON

by Milton Richman

(*Continued from page 28*)

competitor and smart as they come. I've seen him make very few mistakes and I can't remember him making the same one twice. Gordon's the type of player I want at the plate when there's an important run waiting on third."

Despite these plaudits, Gordon is not a "Durocher-type" ballplayer by any stretch of the imagination. Sid rarely tries to throw any weight around with umpires, is not the finished and flashy fielding marvel that Leo was in his day and doesn't own one-half the color of his boss. Sole similarity between the two men, as a matter of fact, is that both climbed from mediocrity via the same formula—hustle.

SINCE his debut with the Giants in 1941, Gordon has always demonstrated a tendency to come through with a damaging blow in the clutch but never was that tendency so pronounced as in the season of 1948.

Take last July 5th, for example. The front-running Boston Braves, holding a tenuous two-game lead over the rest of the pack, invaded the Polo Grounds intent on demolishing the Giants in a twin-bill. Johnny Sain, the loose-jointed, angular ace of Boston's pitching staff, was selected to hurl the opening game and the Braves went through the customary pre-game skull session in the privacy of their clubhouse. Boston Manager Billy Southworth scanned the Giants' lineup and made appropriate comments on each hitter. Eventually, he came to Gordon, batting seventh that day, and wrinkled his creased brow.

"Don't give that fellow anything good to hit at, especially if he comes up with men on bases," Southworth cautioned. "He's liable to lose the ball if you do."

Billy the Kid became a prophet. Boston led 5 to 3 as New York came to bat in the last half of the ninth. The Giants got a runner on base but Sain bore down brilliantly to retire the next two batters. Up came Gordon. Sain, working skilfully and deliberately, and remembering Southworth's warning, ran the count to one-and-one. The Boston righthander then aimed a whistling fastball slightly off the plate. Sid leaned into the pitch with all the bundled might of his 180 pounds and when the ball stopped bouncing it was 375 feet away in the upper leftfield stands. The blow represented Gordon's 18th homer of the season and, thanks to its timeliness, the Giants went on to win in extra innings.

Gordon clouted several important circuit wallops, but maintains he "goes after the long one" only when it is beneficial to the club. Sid, who has belted 57 homers in six years with the Giants, is philosophical about his feats.

"You never know when you're going to hit a homerun," he said. "At least I don't. Many things are involved, particularly luck. You have to meet the ball just right and if the wind is against you, even that doesn't help. Luck is a big factor and I'd only be kidding myself to think otherwise."

Gordon, whose home is less than a short fungo drive from Ebbets Field, yearned to be a big leaguer "almost from the day I was born." He liked the Yankees as a youngster and idolized their immortal first baseman, Lou Gehrig.

"He was such a strong and talented fellow," says Gordon, with admiration, "it was a pleasure to watch him play."

Sid's father encouraged him in his ambition to become a big leaguer but never lived to see his dream fulfilled.

Gordon invariably pictured himself in a Yankee uniform, never in Giant flannels. He came within a whisker of turning his back on the Polo Grounders. The Giants were preparing to close their 42nd street office for the day in January, 1938, when Scout George Mack brought in a stocky, dark-haired youth, smartly attired in a stylish Winter coat. Jack Schwarz, who helps Carl Hubbell supervise the Giants' farm clubs, insists he'll never forget the day Mack strolled in with his pink-cheeked prospect.

Big Boy of the BAA

The BAA goes for the big boys alright — but even the lanky six-footers will have to squint towards the ceiling when one particular member of the Warriors heads for the basket. He's Elmore Morgenthaler, a colorful ex-student at the New Mexico School of Mines. The 26-year-old Elmore measures exactly 7' 1" — and that's no tall story, son.

"I looked at Gordon's frame," Schwarz recalls, "and I thought to myself, 'Boy! They're sure making those overcoats with extra padding in the shoulders these days.'

"Later, when I saw Sid without a coat on, I realized that it actually was his shoulders I had marveled at and not the handiwork of some tailor."

Sidney Gordon was a callow, 20-year-old unknown the day he set foot in the Giants' office for the first time.

"What impressed me most about him outside of wide shoulders," continues Schwarz, "was his quiet, courteous manner. He didn't have much to say but when he did speak, it was with genuine confidence and determination."

Mack asked that Schwarz produce a contract and that Gordon be permitted to sign the document right there and then. Because of a hard-and-fast rule adopted the year before by the Giants, however, Schwarz was powerless to authorize any signing.

Deluged in 1937 with numerous "sure-fire" prospects who somehow never panned out, the Giants, acting in self defense, instituted a rule that no player was to be signed by the organization without a tryout. The rule went double in New York where "another Hank Greenberg" is discovered every day. Schwarz had been given explicit orders on the procedure and the fact that Mack was a newcomer to the New York scouting staff decided the matter.

"How sure are you," Schwarz asked Gordon, "that you could win a job with one of our farm clubs?"

"I'm positive," Sid shot back.

"Would you be willing to gamble on your chances of staying with one of our clubs?"

"Gladly," replied the 5' 10" youngster.

"All right, then," Schwarz countered, "here is our proposition. You pay your own way to our Milford, Delaware, club next Spring. The fare is seven dollars. It'll cost you about fourteen dollars for room and board for a week and you better allow yourself a buck for the movies. That's twenty-two dollars altogether. If you're as good as Mack says, you'll get your money back later."

Gordon readily agreed to the arrangement but a month before he was slated to leave for the Class D Milford club his father died. Before he passed away, Morris Gordon told his son to go through with the trip.

He reported to Manager Val Picinich, one-time Brooklyn Dodger receiver, and within a brief space of three days was the sensation of the camp. He ran, batted and threw so impressively that he was named the team's regular third baseman shortly after his arrival.

EASTERN Shore League pitching contained no riddles for Slashing Sidney, who paced the loop in hitting with a gaudy .352 percentage and threw in 25 homeruns to boot. That rated a promotion to Clinton, Iowa, another Giant farm club in the Class B Three-I League where he rattled rival hurling at a .325 clip. From Clinton, he moved up to Jersey City and on to the Giants.

In the Spring of 1943, the first year Gordon played regularly for the Giants, he reported to Ott at the club's Lakewood, New Jersey, training camp advertised as a combination infielder-outfielder. Ott asked Sid what position he wanted to play and Gordon said it didn't matter much as long as he could play every day. He was speaking from sad experience at the time. While Gordon was with Jersey City he told a baseball writer that he preferred the outfield to third base.

"That really caused a rumpus," Sid laughs. "The writer put my preference in headlines and after the story was printed, the management called me on the carpet. They told me who was running the club!

"Actually, though, it doesn't matter what position I'm at so long as there's work for me every day. I can do my best when I'm in the lineup every day."

When he first tried playing third for the Giants Gordon had one glaring fault.

"He rushed the ball over to first too quickly every time he came up with a grounder," reported Billy Jurges, then a New York coach.

"Take more time on your throws," advised the baseball-wise Jurges. "Your arm is strong enough so you needn't hurry with them."

Gordon took heed and his defensive work perked up. He alternated between third base and the outfield in 1943 but his diamond career was forced to wait in October of that year when he entered the Coast Guard. He remained in bell-bottoms until January, 1946.

Bothered by blood hemorrhages in his legs during the 1946 campaign, Gordon nevertheless participated in 135 contests and batted at a .293 clip.

When the 1948 season opened, Sid was scheduled for utility duty behind Jack Lohrke, the young, rifle-armed Californian. With outfielders like Willard Marshall and the heralded Whitey Lockman and Bobby Thomson around, Ott couldn't easily visualize Gordon crashing the outer picket line. Tentatively, therefore, he was the No. 2 man at the hot corner. Lohrke slumped at bat after April, however, and Sid got the call. Once he was inserted into the lineup, only an earthquake or a Congressional order could have dislodged him.

HITTING and hustling at a surprisingly hot tempo, Gordon accounted for several Giant victories single-handedly. After one particularly stirring performance against the Cardinals in St. Louis, Ott called him a "life-saver." But even Sid's solid clouting couldn't save Mel's job and the former outfielder yielded the reins to Durocher on July 16. If you ask Gordon whom he prefers to play under, Ott or Durocher, you'll receive this discreet reply:

"I enjoy playing for Leo—but don't forget Mel was a grand guy and I never had any trouble with him. As managers both Ott and Durocher are appreciative of a player's efforts.

"They tell me that Durocher likes my style of play and I'm certainly tickled to know that. When Leo took over the club I told him I was willing to play either third base or the outfield, wherever he wanted me.

"Durocher has been very fair. He compliments you for a good play. He congratulated me many times—but he is just as quick to let you know when you do something wrong.

"In that respect," Gordon points out, "Leo is just like any other manager.

"Many of the balls I used to hit would go to straightaway center for long outs," Sid explained. "Coach Red Kress, who was a fine pull-hitter, showed me my mistakes. He moved me closer to the plate; squared me around more toward the pitcher and taught me a lot about pulling the ball to leftfield. He deserves all the credit, not me. Some of those homers I hit into the leftfield stands last season would have been easy flies to center if it wasn't for Red."

When Gordon's in a slump, he utilizes Kress' theory in reverse English.

"If I go for the collar two or three days," Sid declared, "I try to hit to the opposite field, which in my case is rightfield. I merely try to meet the ball and push it toward right. I remember trying that once against Dutch Leonard last year and hitting the wall for two bases."

A group of his friends, by way of paying tribute to Gordon's consistency, gave him a "day" last July 3. They presented him with a sleek, new Chrysler automobile at Ebbets Field, of all places, and Gordon, by way of saying thanks, bashed two homers against Brooklyn. That, as far as he's concerned, ranks as his supreme thrill in baseball.

By tradition, the Dodgers are the Giants' arch rivals but Gordon derives no extraordinary pleasure from beating them. "Beating Brooklyn is just like beating any other team," he observed. "Only nice thing about it is that I can keep my head high when I walk past the Dodger fans in my neighborhood."

Unlike many major-leaguers, Gordon does not loaf throughout the Winter. During the past few years he has occupied himself at various off-season pursuits including the selling of automobiles, men's hats and clothing. He also spends considerable time playing handball, which he claims toughens his legs and sharpens his eyes. His legs, which bothered him when he emerged from Service in 1946, are in tip-top condition.

"I could tell my legs were in good shape when I was able to come in fast on guys like Richie Ashburn," Gordon revealed. "That Ashburn, for my money, is faster than air-mail."

Until he was laid low with a shoulder injury, spindly Ewell Blackwell of Cincinnati used to be Sid's pitching nemesis. Like most hitters, Gordon claims all pitchers are tough but concedes he enjoyed "some good luck" against Murry Dickson of the Cards.

Of course, his 1948 performance wasn't entirely predicated upon "some good luck," but if you listen to Gordon long enough you're apt to believe it. Sid, you see, is sort of handicapped. He pops off about as often as he pops out. ■

Wide World

Saddleback Lake, near Rangeley, Maine, provided Sid with a 200-pound buck. It was Sid's first hunting excursion into the Maine Woods. His batting average with the gun was 1.000.

MAN O' WAR

by Horace Wade

(*Continued from page 49*)

and it cost him all of two lengths. From there to the finish he was chargin' again like a jet-propelled plane but Upset had just enough speed left to push his head down in front."

Knapp reflectively eyed his cigar as the picture returned as clear as nooday in his mind.

"There wasn't any doubt who was the best horse in the race," he said. "Take a gander at the records. Upset never beat Man o' War again. 'Big Red' came back to win the Hopeful, the Futurity, the Grand Union and 20 out of 21 races in all.

"You hear lots of stories about that race, even to this day, but I can tell you truthfully Jockey Johnny Loftus never tried harder to win. Nor did he ever forgive me for beatin' him. Later that year I rode against him in a stake race at Havre de Grace. I was ridin' Exterminator and he was up on Cudgel, and at the top of the stretch I ran right into a blind switch on top of his mount. Loftus looked around and yelled: 'Don't let that so-and-so through.' He was still bitter. Exterminator, however, made his own luck. He bulled his way through between the leaders to win goin' away, but it just gives you an idea of how Johnny Loftus felt.

"Sure, Upset beat him an' Man o' War, all right—it was the biggest thrill of my life—but lookin' back at it now I know Man o' War was sure one horse which should've retired undefeated. Never was a horse like him. He could do anything—and do it better than any other horse that ever lived. If I'd moved over just an eyelash that day at Saratoga he'd have whipped me from here to Jalopy and never had a losing scratch against his record.

"Sometimes, thinkin' back, I'm sorry I didn't do it!" ■