

RETROSPECTIVE

Baseball Took Ott From Gretna to Cooperstown

by

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Mel Ott was the greatest major leaguer ever to emerge from the New Orleans area. Born in Gretna in 1909, Ott was recognized as a natural three-sport athlete at a tender age. When Ott was 16, New Orleans Pelicans owner A. J. Heinemann arranged for the young phenom to tryout for the legendary manager of the New York Giants, John McGraw.

McGraw was impressed enough with Ott's talent to immediately sign the teenager to a New York Giants contract. McGraw vowed to never allow Ott to play in the minor leagues so that no hitting coach would have the opportunity to tinker with his unorthodox but effective swing.

Ott was brought along slowly in a big league environment in New York city whose sports scene in the 1920s was dominated by the Yankees and Babe Ruth. Despite a long and successful career with the Giants, Mel Ott always seemed destined to play in the long shadow of the Yankees superstars. Nevertheless, Mel Ott put together a Hall of Fame career in leading the Giants to three World Series (1933, 1936 and 1937) and one World Championship in 1933 when his 10th inning home run off Senators' reliever Jack Russell in Game Five was the game-winning and Series-winning blow for the Giants. Ott went on to manage the Giants, but never achieved the excellence he enjoyed as a player.

Mel Ott's Career Highlights

- **April 27, 1926** – Ott made his major league debut for the Giants just eight weeks after his 17th birthday.
- Ott sat on the Giants bench for most of the 1926 season, getting only 60 at-bats all year.
- **1927** – Ott hit the first of his 511 major league home runs.
- **1929** – Ott hit 42 home runs in his first season as an everyday player at the age of 20. Ironically, though it was the only 40-homer year in his career, Ott finished 1929 second in the NL to Chuck Klein, who hit 43 for the Phillies.
- **1932** – Ott won the first of his six home run titles when he hit 38 for a sixth place club.
- **1933** – The Giants surged to the NL pennant though Ott had a sub-par season. He made up for it in the World Series, homering in the 1st inning of Game One and in the 10th inning of Game Five.
- **1934** – Ott made his first appearance on the NL All-Star team. He was an All-Star eleven consecutive years.
- **1936** – The Giants won the NL Pennant, their second with Ott. The team hit 97 homers as a team that year. Ott, in winning his 3rd home run crown, accounted for more than one-third of them (33).
- The 1936 season also marked the first and only season in which Ott led the league in slugging percentage (.588). He also led the league in on-base percentage four times. He received 100 or more walks ten times and led the NL in walks six times.
- **1937** – Ott's final World Series appearance. In spite of a game-tying home run off Lefty Gomez in his last Series game, the Yankees prevailed over the Giants, 4 games to 1.
- **August 1, 1945** – At the Polo Grounds, Ott became the first National Leaguer to reach the 500-home run milestone.

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Mel Ott's Career Highlights

(continued)

- **1942** – Ott replaced Bill Terry as Giants manager, but New York finished a distant third well behind the Cardinals and Dodgers. With wartime depriving baseball of most of its young talent, the Giants finished in the NL cellar in 1943. Another last-place finish in 1946 made it apparent that Ott's days as a manager were numbered.
- It is generally accepted that it was Ott to whom Leo Durocher was referring when he made his oft-repeated comment that "*Nice guys finish last,*" before moving over from the hated Brooklyn Dodgers to take over management of the Giants during the 1948 season.
- In Ott's six and a half seasons of managing the Giants (1,004 games) they compiled a record of 464 – 530 (.467).
- In the summer of 1951 Mel Ott was inducted into the Hall of Fame in Cooperstown in his fourth year of eligibility.
- Ott held the National League record for career home runs with 511 until it was broken by another Giants player who was in his rookie season during the summer of Ott's Hall of Fame induction – Willie Mays.
- Mel Ott died in New Orleans on November 21, 1958 from injuries suffered in an automobile accident. He was 49 years old.



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