After five years as a coach, Tony Gwynn hasn't found the success he thought he would

by Kirk Kenney

SAN DIEGO - Expectations were high in 2003 when Tony Gwynn was hired to replace Jim Dietz as coach of the San Diego State baseball team.

There was talk of Mountain West Conference championships, NCAA regional appearances, even trips to Omaha for the College World Series.

After five years, Aztecs fans are still waiting to realize those expectations.

SDSU won a regular-season MWC championship in 2004, but the program's postseason drought has now reached 16 years. It hasn't been easy. In fact, it's been far more difficult than Gwynn ever imagined. His teams are 142-162.

With his sixth season as head coach under way, Gwynn sat down recently for a question-and-answer session about the program, its failure to get to the postseason, the criticism he's heard and his future at SDSU. The highlights from that conversation:

Q. After five years, is this where you thought the program would be, or did you think it would be further along?

A. "I thought we would be further ahead, to be honest. We're making progress. After we won the conference my second year I thought we were getting there. But progress is measured in getting to a regional and we haven't done that. As head coach, I've changed my thought process on a lot of things. I'm old school and with today's kids, old school's not a likable style. I've had to change my style a little bit to be a little bit more relaxed, a little bit more outgoing, a little bit more talkative. I've let my coaches coach a whole lot more. But to answer the question: No, we're not where I thought we would be. That doesn't take away from the fun of trying to get there.

"It's tougher, for me at least, knowing that everything you're trying to do is being accomplished down the road at USD. It's frustrating. You're trying to keep up. They're doing all the things that need to be done. That's what we want to be doing."

Q. When you look at USD's program, it isn't blessed with the facilities that SDSU has, it doesn't have the name recognition SDSU has and it doesn't have a coach who's in the Hall of Fame. Yet the program has

climbed into the national rankings. What is USD doing that SDSU needs to be doing?

A. "They're winning games. I think both teams are recruiting, bringing in quality players. They're winning. We're not. The reason we put FINISH IT on the back of these (practice) T-shirts, we had just swept UCLA last year (beginning a stretch in which the team went 15-6), we were 27-17 and I really thought we could mark that series as the series that got us over the hump. We were getting ready to go into TCU, we were a game out of first place and playing our best baseball. I thought, 'We've got it.' We proceeded to lose 12 of 13, completely stopped hitting and when it was over you looked back and asked, 'What happened? Why?'

"I think USD has set a great example of how you get it done. They pitch. They catch it. They have timely hitting. They're well coached. Probably more importantly they believe in what they're doing. When they go out there every day they believe they have a chance to win. That's where we're trying to get to."

Q. SDSU hasn't been to an NCAA Regional since 1991. What do you have to do to get there?

A. "Our road is a lot more difficult than just about any other conference in America because we're in a conference that is not very highly thought of in baseball. The coaches are trying everything they can to change that. We have to schedule a little bit tougher than most others have to do. And we have to win games. Ultimately, that's what it boils down to. It's in our best interest to win games against quality teams, not just win games. We've won 40 games (43 in 2002, when Gwynn was a volunteer assistant) and not gotten to a regional. It's about quality wins. It's about playing good teams and beating them."

Q. What vision did you come into the program with, and has it changed?

A. "I came in with the vision of getting us to the College World Series. That's my goal. A regional is the start. You have to get to a regional before you get to the College World Series. We haven't even done that. I thought we would have done that a couple of times. ... The last couple of years have been tough. So you change things. You change your style. You change recruiting. You change the way you practice. The way you prepare. You end up making a lot of changes trying to find the right formula to get you where you want to go."

Q. Most coaches work their way up for years before they become a head coach. Has it been more difficult for you to learn from scratch?

A. "No question that's part of it, too. I volunteered under Coach Dietz that first year, but I definitely didn't learn all I needed to learn. Going into Year 6 I'm a lot more confident now with the things we're doing and the way we're doing things and the lessons you need to learn. ... Nobody said it was going to be easy, that just

because you were a successful baseball player that you were automatically going to walk in there and be successful. Because that's what I thought when I got the job. I thought it was going to be easy. And, boy, was I wrong. You learn pretty quickly that you're wrong. And you learn pretty quickly that you have to make adjustments.

"We learned a lot last year in that we had five pitchers we could start. What a huge advantage that was because you could set aside a guy to pitch specifically on Tuesday. The way we swung the bats early, I thought we really had a chance to win 38, 39 or 40 games. And then we just stopped hitting. As we looked more closely, we had a roster full of guys who had not played a full college season. ... And we just hit that wall at about 40 games and we just couldn't kick it in gear anymore. So, again, you make your adjustments."

Q. What do you say to people who had high expectations because of the success you had as a player?

A. "Fair or unfair, that's right. I can't knock them for expecting more. I definitely do things a lot differently than Coach Dietz did them. The first thing that comes to mind is scheduling. He looked at me like I was out of my mind two years ago when he saw our schedule. He said, 'You're not going to get there playing the kind of schedules you're playing.' I said, 'Coach, these are the types of teams we're going to have to play if we do get there.' ... I told him the year I volunteered we won 43 games and didn't get in because we didn't play anybody. I think it's better off going this way. Maybe I'm wrong."

Q. Given what you've learned the past five years, would you consider yourself a good college coach, or is there still a lot of learning to do?

A. "There's still a lot of learning to do. My in-game stuff is better, not great yet. As a player, it's easy to think ahead because it's just you. Now you're thinking ahead with your bullpen, pinch runner, pinch hitter. What they're doing. Who they have coming up. And I'm much better now than I was, but. ... When I first started out I thought it was going to be a whole lot easier. I thought recruiting was going to be cake. It really boils down to the simplest thing. When's the last time you've been to a regional? What's it been, 17 years now? Kids want to win. So your next line is, 'Wouldn't you want to be part of something that gets us there?' We need to win. Our guys know it. Our administration knows it. I know it. Fans know it."

Q. As a student of the game, how hard has it been to transfer your knowledge to college players?

A. "Not hard. The stuff I learned was basic stuff, like 'Hitting 101.' I give them basic things to go by. Get in position. Take the swing.

Offensively, it's easy to teach. Guys are receptive because they know your background and they know what

you were about. ... The things that they don't know are the things you kind of have to learn on the fly. You can't learn it taking batting practice. You can only learn it in game-type situations where velocity is going to make you think. Most hitters it makes them speed up, and when you speed up you make outs. And so the hitting philosophy is easy. The other things we do, baserunning we want to be aggressive. And pitching, we want to throw Strike 1. So the principles we go by are basic things."

Q. If you were the consummate student of hitting, why is it that SDSU is not one of the top hitting programs in the country?

A. "That's a good question. I've asked myself that one a lot. This year I've kind of made it a point to give them the basic principles and let Mark (assistant coach Mark Martinez) work with them a lot more. I work with them, but I think my style is too demanding. They need to relax. You can't hit being tense."

Q. Do you buy into the statement that a great player can't be a great coach?

A. "No. Hell, no. I don't believe that at all. As long as your record's under .500 that's always going to be thrown in my face. Good players probably have less patience than guys who struggled or weren't successful as players but were great as coaches, but I don't buy that at all.

Eventually we'll get things to go the way we want them to go."

Q. Critics have said your teams, especially early on, weren't fundamentally sound. What would you say to that?

A. "I think they'd be right. They weren't fundamentally sound, and that's directly on us as a coaching staff. We preach stuff. You teach them stuff and prepare them and those situations would come up. ... Texas came in here (to open the 2005 season) and bunted like five straight hitters on us and it looked like we had never worked on a bunt play. Those first three years it really looked like we were unprepared. We've changed that.

Changed the practice plan. Some days we don't even hit. Just straight defense. We put them in those situations and make them execute.

"My critics have a whole lot to talk about. That's OK. It's their right. They can be critical."

Q. What have your teams' biggest weaknesses been, and how have you gone about correcting them?

A. "The last couple of years it's not having anybody with any power. We couldn't change a game with one swing of the bat. We had to manufacture stuff all the time. And when guys aren't hitting, it's hard to manufacture. You need somebody in there every now and then who can thump one, get you some cheapies, a two- or three-run homer."

Q. What do you think your teams have done best?

A. "Baserunning. Every team we've had has been good going first-to-third or second-to-home. Picking up the extra 90 feet, kind of like the Angels' style of aggressiveness."

Q. San Diego County is one of the nation's hotbeds for baseball talent. Do you think you've tapped into that as well as you could?

A. "I think we've done a really good job here in town. Our problem has been getting them here. We lost (Valhalla's) Sean O'Sullivan. We lost (Mission Bay's) Henry Sanchez. We lost (Morse's) Adam Jones. And every coach could tell you the same thing. You go out and recruit them and get them signed on the dotted line, and then the draft comes and you lose them. Those first few years we went for the top-of-the-line guy and he never got here and we're scrambling in the summer trying to find bodies just so we can get our team together. Now we've kind of changed gears a little bit. We still go after guys we think are top-of-the-line guys, but you back them up by getting guys who are not quite at that level. Again, part of that learning curve."

Q. Can SDSU ever become an elite program as part of the Mountain West Conference, or does the altitude, weather, travel and lack of top-notch teams hurt your program?

A. "I think we can. I think people would consider TCU that, for a long time consider UNLV that. BYU is always solid. I think we're that type of program."

Q. Your presence on TV has brought exposure to the program, but critics have said that you're not around. What is your thought on that?

A. "Critics are critics. I do Opening Day for the Padres and that's really the only day that I do until our season here is over. After our season ends, recruiting is already in the bank and I start doing games. July 1 is when

you can start talking to recruits, which we do. Area Code Games are early August, which I'm at.

"You're damned if you do, and you're damned if you don't. ... Critics are critics. They're going to say whatever they say. I just say, ask the kids how much time and effort goes into preparing these guys to do what they came here to do, get an education and go to school. It's not going to stop until you actually win and have a chance to go to Omaha."

Q. Do you still believe you can get the national rankings, go to a regional and get to the College World Series?

A. "Absolutely. If I didn't, I wouldn't be here. I would be doing something else. But I do feel like we can get there. And when we do I won't say I told you so, but I believe we can get there and I believe these guys think we can get there. But it's going to take a lot of hard work and perseverance. And some luck."

Q. Would you ever walk away, and what would it take to force you out?

A. "I would (leave) if something better came along. I don't know what that is right now. It's just like playing. Sooner or later you're going to get fired, or retire or quit and do something else. That's just the nature of the game. Everybody wishes you could do it forever, but you can't."

Q. But aren't you in a different situation than most other coaches?

A. "Yes, because I'm not using this job as a steppingstone to something else. This is where I want to be."

Q. But as an icon in San Diego, it wouldn't be easy to fire Tony Gwynn, would it?

A. "That's what everybody thinks. I don't buy that. Bottom line is W's. I know it. My staff knows it. The kids know it. That's the bottom line, putting W's on the board."

Q. Do you feel any extra pressure to achieve since this is the last year of your contract?

A. "Nope. I was on the last year the last time. I've made my case plenty of times that this is the place I want to be. I'm not worried about that part of it."

Q. Don't you think, for one reason or another, there will always be those who question what you do and how you do it?

A. "My past is never going to leave me. It's always going to be there and it's always something that you're going to have to deal with. But for the critics out there who say I'm not here every day, I laugh. And for the critics who say I don't work hard, I laugh. For the critics who say I haven't won enough games, I'm listening. I agree. I haven't won enough games. And that's what we're going to try and do. But I'm only five years in. Every coach that has been here has been here 25, 30 years. I'm only five years in. The next five might be fantastic. ... So we'll see. I'm very optimistic about it because I think we've really turned the corner. Again, talk is cheap. We need to win some frickin' games."

THE GWYNN ERA

Tony Gwynn's year-by-year record as San Diego State head baseball coach:

YEAR - OVERALL - MOUNTAIN WEST

2003 - 29-32 - 18-12 (2nd)

2004 - 35-29 - 19-9 (1st)

2005 - 26-35 - 17-13 (3rd)

2006 - 23-36 - 14-8 (2nd)

2007 - 29-30 - 12-12 (3rd)

TOTAL - 142-162 - 80-54

THE UPSIDE

- Gwynn was named Mountain West Coach of the Year in 2004 after guiding the Aztecs to the regular-season championship.

- Regarded as the best pure hitter in the past half century, Gwynn brings plenty to the plate as a hitting instructor.

- SDSU played the first game at Petco Park in 2004, beating Houston 4-0 before the largest crowd (40,106) in college baseball history. It was part of the Aztec Invitational, an event spearheaded by Gwynn that generated $1 million for the SDSU athletic department.

- Gwynn's Hall of Fame induction, local and national broadcasting and other appearances gave the SDSU baseball program a tremendous amount of exposure it would not otherwise have received.

THE DOWNSIDE

- SDSU recruited too well in Gwynn's first few seasons - the Aztecs signed highly rated recruits who chose to sign professional contracts over the college campus - and had to adjust accordingly.

- Scouts and other observers frequently criticized the Aztecs for poor fundamental play in Gwynn's first three years as head coach.

- Gwynn's appearances as a broadcaster for ESPN were used by some college recruiters to portray him as an absentee coach.

- Gwynn's relatively infrequent appearances during games - he doesn't coach third base or make pitching changes - have prompted some to question who is running the team.

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