

Gwynn's tireless work made game look easy

by Nick Canepa

SAN DIEGO - On July 29, Tony Gwynn will cease being a future baseball Hall of Famer. The "future" part of it will be gone. He will be inducted. And he's more nervous than a London goose around Christmastime.

"The magnitude of it is hitting me square in the face," the Aztecs baseball coach was saying Monday at San Diego State. "I'm having trouble sleeping at night. I'm looking forward to it, but I'm scared to death."

During his 20 years with the Padres, Anthony Keith Gwynn played in 2,440 games. He went to bat 9,288 times. He had 3,141 hits. He won eight National League batting titles. He faced monsters, the likes of Randy Johnson and Nolan Ryan.

Scared? T. Gwynn? On the field, he never showed it. This is a man who led the league in hitting the year he went bankrupt.

Nor did Gwynn ever have any trouble speaking. He could chat. I can't remember going to the ballpark without having a conversation with him. I've been around him from the first day he stepped onto State's basketball court as a freshman out of Long Beach Poly High, and he could talk.

He always could talk. But now the biggest worry in his life is having to make a speech at his induction ceremony in Cooperstown, N.Y., with family, friends and about 65 living Hall of Famers looking on.

The speech is done, an advance copy sent to the Hall, as if the induction is in Gettysburg. But if Gwynn reads it as written, it will be more of an upset than him striking out five times in a game. Not happening.

"On July 29, the speech is what people are going to remember," he says. "I'm not the type of guy who reads verbatim. I have bullet points I want to make. Emotionally, can I get through it?"

"It's getting pretty hectic. It's pretty unbelievable, people's reaction to all this. As each day goes by, I get more and more nervous. I'm looking forward to it. It's going to be an unbelievable experience. I hope I find a way to get through it."

He will get emotional, as he did Jan. 9, when word came from the Hall. But you just know he's going to hit

one through the 5.5 hole. Among all the great athletes - people - I've known, Gwynn had the most extraordinary gift, the ability to completely block out anything bad or good in his life when he was at work.

Proof: a batting title when he went bankrupt, which he also overcame. Think that didn't weigh on him? This was a man with a family. But he batted around it. He always batted around things. That's why he's going where he's going.

Meanwhile, he's busy. He has his everyday job at State. Saturday, the Padres will unveil his statue - which he still hasn't seen - at Petco Park. Tony Gwynn Weekend is upon us, with giveaways, and over that time he will be doing analyst work for TV. Next week, he's off to see the wizard. Well, Ozzie Smith will be there.

Gwynn won't reveal what's in the speech. "You'll have to wait until July 29th," he says. "I can't give away all of my secrets. It's part of the intrigue. I'm still fighting to go first (speak before fellow inductee Cal Ripken Jr.). We'll see how that works out."

Many people will be thanked, those who helped him along the way. He asked great players questions. "I was always a pest," he says. But Gwynn was a self-made ballplayer. He sculpted himself. First to arrive at the ballpark, he was a video pioneer. He studied T. Gwynn on tape.

"Video helped me understand myself," he says. "Video was huge."

He hardly was a great fielder when the Padres drafted him in 1981. On the same day, the Clippers drafted him. "As a kid, I dreamed of playing in the NBA," he says. And he could have played on those Clippers. But wisely he chose baseball and went to work on his fielding and eventually won five Gold Gloves.

"There was no magic theory," he says. "Tommy House taught me how to throw the ball correctly and coaches hit me hundreds of fly balls. I came into this game with deficiencies. I knew I had to work at it."

It's trite. It's among the most overused phrases in sports, that "working-hard" jazz. But I can't imagine anyone in the history of baseball spending more time honing his craft than Gwynn. The only sad thing was that, in the end, his knees let him down. This is a player who once stole 56 bases in a season.

One thing he didn't do was hit many home runs. I have the feeling that, if all he wanted to do was pull the ball and hit some out, he could have. But he was who he was. He hit .394 in 1994, before baseball shut down.

He would have hit .400, I insist. Gwynn agrees.

"Oh, yeah," he says. "It sounds crazy 13 years later. But anybody who knew me knew I wasn't going down. I was going the other way."

Oh, yeah. North by Northeast. To Cooperstown.

Copley News Service

Gwynn's tireless work made game look easy by Nick Canepa