

Gwynn accepts Bench-mark meaning of a Hall of Famer

by Chris Jenkins

COOPERSTOWN, N.Y. - All but eight of the 61 living Hall of Famers had shown up for the induction of Tony Gwynn and Cal Ripken. Just slightly overstating the case, Gwynn only wanted to throttle one of them.

Johnny Bench.

Kidding is kidding, and hazing is hazing, but Gwynn admitted that the legendary catcher "got under my skin" with some of the barbs he threw at Gwynn from the time he and his family arrived in Cooperstown from San Diego. By late Saturday, Gwynn had had quite enough, and it was all he could do to keep from firing back at Bench.

He's happy he didn't. See, it's been a long time since Gwynn was a rookie, more than a quarter of a century. Only a few hours after Sunday's enshrinement ceremony, Gwynn suddenly understood that Bench was merely playing the role of provocateur, putting Gwynn through the paces as a newcomer to the Hall of Fame brotherhood.

He also came to truly understand what it meant to be a Hall of Famer. Courtesy of Bench, of all people.

"On the bus to the ceremony, (Bench) asked both Cal and me to sign his credential," Gwynn said Monday. "Then he said, 'After the ceremony I need to talk to you two for five minutes. On the bus ride back (to the Hall members' hotel), we're thinking, 'Aw, gee, what does this guy want to talk about?'"

Returning to the Hall of Famers' hotel, Gwynn and Ripken dutifully met Bench on the veranda, overlooking Lake Otsego. Bench had Gwynn sit in a rocking chair, Ripken in another, and then he sat between them. Thus began the "zen moment," as Ripken called it Monday.

"Look, guys," Bench said by Gwynn's recollection, "for three days they pull you around and make you do things, make you go places, talk, make you do everything. For five minutes now, I just want you to come here and sit down and enjoy what being a Hall of Famer is all about.

"Look at the lake. Look at the (lush, wooded) surroundings. Look at the background. Just soak it all in."

So they did. And pent-up angst dissipated.

"I'm rocking ... and I'm rocking ... and I'm rocking," Gwynn said. "I order a Coke ... and I'm rocking some more. After two minutes of rocking, I'm like, 'Aw, man, this is awesome!'"

All was forgiven. Truth be told, Gwynn had been supremely ticked at Bench, who can be brutal and tactless with his taunts, so much so that whatever humor is intended is easily lost by victims and witnesses. Gwynn, clearly, was his target in Cooperstown before the actual ceremony.

"I gotta admit, he was under my skin, but he was awesome (Sunday)," Gwynn said. "He told us, 'Hey, at first it's our job to bust you a bit because you guys are rookies. That's part of it. And, yeah, maybe I did take it a bit too far. But both you guys are Hall of Famers now.'"

The two newcomers were back on the very stage of their induction Monday, this time in front of 2,500 Hall of Fame Museum members who bought tickets to watch and participate in the taping of an hourlong television interview with Gwynn and Ripken. The day before, the same area was packed with a record crowd of 75,000.

A few blocks away, meanwhile, there was another line that ran from inside the Hall of Fame and clear down Main Street. Before the past weekend, the single-day record of visitors to the Hall was 9,800. The head count was 14,000 on Saturday.

A majority of people, seemingly split half-and-half in Padres and Baltimore Orioles garb, were there Monday to see and have their picture taken with the plaques of Gwynn and Ripken. The two got a prime location, quite close to the section with the plaques of the revered original Class of '36: Babe Ruth. Ty Cobb. Honus Wagner. Christy Mathewson. Walter Johnson.

Actually, the people inside the Hall were seeing something Gwynn himself had yet to see on the wall.

"I still haven't seen it there," Gwynn said. "I'm saving that till next year."

Gwynn's immediate plans upon leaving Cooperstown was a vacation with his wife, Alicia, at an undisclosed locale. First, though, there was hay to be made at work. The baseball coach at San Diego State planned to make some recruiting calls last night.

"College baseball is blowing up ... and I'm in the perfect spot," Gwynn said to Monday's crowd. "I'm sleeping in my own bed and wearing S.D. on my hat."

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