

Tony Gwynn has always been able to hit

by Bill Center

San Diego Union-Tribune staff writer Bill Center first covered Tony Gwynn when Gwynn was a basketball player at San Diego State, and covered him throughout his 20-year Padres career. Center and Gwynn sat down recently to talk about the player's life, his Hall of Fame career and the game of baseball.

BC: When did you first think in terms of the Hall of Fame?

TG: "I'm standing on first after getting my 2,000th hit. Jerald Clark is the Rockies first baseman. We're close from our Padre days. I told Jerald, 'I have a thousand to go.' And he says, 'You can make it and you know what that means, the Hall of Fame.' I went home that night and started looking at what some guys had done."

BC: Funny, because it must have been about the same time that I looked at the list of all-time hit leaders and tried to guess where you would finish. My guess was around 3,500. What did you think?

TG: "I thought the same thing. I thought maybe No.5. I was looking at Stan Musial's 3,630. Wouldn't that be something, because he was such a great hitter. But I couldn't stay away from injuries. I wasn't alone, that's the great equalizer. You don't think about that when you are rolling."

BC: Along the way, you got that tag, singles hitter. Later in your career, you hit more for power. What do you think of your tag?

HALL OF FAMER - Tony Gwynn had the dugout to himself at Qualcomm Stadium hours after announcing his retirement six years ago last month. 2001 file photo.

TG: "I'm proud of it. I'm proud to say, 'There's more than one way to get into the Hall of Fame.' I think it would be a disservice to the sport if it were open only to sluggers. Honestly, I never thought about home runs as being the thing. Growing up, I gravitated to guys like Pete Rose, Rod Carew, Paul Molitor and George Brett. I'd get up in the morning to see what they did in the box scores. Two-for-three, OK. As a kid, I didn't have great success hitting the long ball. But I could carve. Those were my heroes."

BC: But the way you've talked over these last years, people believe your talk with Ted Williams was a great awakening ... that it changed your game.

TG: "It changed part of it. Ted talked to me about one aspect, turning on the ball when the opportunity presented itself. I was always open to ideas from guys who knew what they were talking about. Ted didn't just

say, 'Do this,' he showed how it could be done. OK, let's mix this in and see if it works."

BC: Who was the toughest pitcher you ever faced?

TG: "Randy Johnson. No question. I have a saying: 'It's hard to swing the bat when the booty is tight.'"

BC: Name your all-time, all-opponent team.

TG: "Barry Bonds in left, Dale Murphy in center, Andre Dawson in right, that lets me put Larry Walker at first. Mike Schmidt at third, Ozzie Smith is the shortstop. The catcher is Mike Piazza. Second is not easy ... I'd say Jeff Kent. Johnson is the left-handed pitcher. Pedro Martinez. Closer. And we're all-opponent here, make that clear, Robb Nen."

BC: Name your five favorite characters along the way.

TG: "One is Rickey Henderson. Now you talk about crazy, he was out of control with stuff. Cracked me up. Two is a tie, Mark Davis and Wally Joyner. Three, Broderick Perkins, just listening to his voice cracked me up. Four, Greg Booker, we came up together, talk about funny, and he could spin some down-home philosophy. Five, Jerald Clark, great sense of humor, always kept me loose."

BC: Last week you said your speech was done. Is it?

TG: "I lied. I keep thinking of more names. So many people should be mentioned. I know I'm going to miss someone. Sad. I am the extension of so many people in so many ways. From my Little League coaches to Rob Picciolo hitting me thousands of fly balls. Where do you begin? I'm not done. I could go on forever."

BC: You've said you are concerned about getting through the speech without 'going emotional.' My over-under to when that happens is when you first think of your dad.

TG: "No it won't. I see that trap. It's like a huge hole waiting to swallow me up. I'm going to address that early. Because that is where it begins, with my mom and dad."

BC: Talk about your parents in, I don't know, 100 words or less.

TG: "I could do my entire speech on my parents. Don't just look at me. Look at my brothers, Charles and Chris. Look at us all. My parents really set the bar high. And they expected us to come up to it. Stubborn. God, they were stubborn. 'Are you satisfied with your effort? Could you have done more?' I laugh now. I am them. That's a point I want to make with my speech."

BC: What else?

TG: (Laughing) "I am not going to spill the beans. How long have we been doing this? I know the routine. Get Tony talking long enough and he's going to tell it all. But good try."

BC: One thing I'd love to hear about is your love of the game. We hear so much about your work ethic, your pioneering of the use of video. But you really love baseball.

TG: OK, so you know my speech. On the 29th, it's going to be about my love of baseball and the people I've connected with the sport. Fire and brimstone. Let it rip."

BC: Talk about that love of baseball.

TG: "I love everything about it. I do. It's crazy. From the time I was a kid, I loved baseball. And basketball. But baseball, because of the names and the connections you could draw. I could be in the back yard with my brothers and a couple of friends and I could be Claude Osteen pitching or Willie Davis playing center field. Pitching, hitting, baserunning, bunting. I love this time of the year because of the trade rumors. People really have no idea how much I love the game. That's what the 29th is for. My chance to say I love baseball."

BC: Trade rumors?

TG: "Even the ones that involved me. 'They're going to do what? (Laughing) I'm worth more than that.' Baseball always gives you something to think about it. And anyone can play it, although no one ever reaches perfection. Even when I'm winning a batting title, I'm failing as much as that kid in Little League. There are kids out there who have hit .400 at some level. I didn't up here. Came close."

BC: I remember when you went to the Hall of Fame for your orientation tour. They kept trying to speed you along and you wanted to spend as much time at each exhibit. Were you more of a fan than a Hall of Famer that day?

TG: "One of the great perks with being a Hall of Famer is that I can now go, I hope, into corners of the Hall of Fame and see some things I really want to see. Like bats and gloves from a century ago. I can't wait to go back after all this dies down. Like I said, I am a fan of the game. On that day when I went for the orientation, we crossed paths a couple times with groups going through. A couple times I just wanted to reach out to one of those kids and say, 'Isn't this great?' I was like a kid that day."

BC: Recently, we talked about a couple of turning points in your life. The first involved your high school basketball coaches, Ron Palmer and Jim Ferguson.

TG: "When I was a junior, we had a great team. Most of those players moved on. Going into my senior year, I thought I was going to be the star. Coach Palmer pulled me aside and said, 'Tony, your job is to make everyone on this team better. You are the point guard, the senior, the leader. You have the ability to make everyone around you better or you can be selfish and be that star.' Major turning point."

BC: And you mentioned a defining moment at San Diego State.

TG: "I quit the basketball team once. Smokey Gaines had gotten all over me in practice. He singled me out. We had words. He threw me out of practice. I went down to the baseball field and told Coach (Jim) Dietz that I was quitting basketball and was ready to play baseball. Coach Dietz told me if that was my attitude, I wasn't going to be playing baseball either for San Diego State. He told me my parents didn't raise me to be a quitter. But I'm thinking they had raised me to be stubborn. No way I'm going back to Coach Gaines and apologize. But Coach Dietz talked me down. I went back, played the best eight games of my basketball career and joined the baseball team. If I hadn't finished basketball, I don't think Coach Dietz would have let me play baseball. Then where would I be? Not in the Hall of Fame. Weird."

BC: Actually, I was thinking about Bobby Meacham.

TG: (Laughing) "I guess I spilled the beans on me and Smokey. It was Bobby who first really pointed me out to Coach Dietz for baseball. I was a basketball player at San Diego State and was not allowed to approach baseball. So Coach Dietz didn't really know about me, until Bobby pointed me out walking down the hall during a recruiting visit. Strange thing was, Bobby had almost accepted a scholarship to Arizona State before visiting San Diego State. If Bobby goes to Arizona State ... "

BC: So, what is the secret to Tony Gwynn?

TG: "Information. It starts everything. How I prepared depended on the information I had received. I was a guy who always wanted more information. Feed me. The more the better. To the extreme. It's why I started using videotape. Watch the tape. Watch the pitcher. Watch the pitcher warm up. I was a counterpuncher because of the information I had. I wanted to be ready for whatever the pitcher could do. How do you do that? Information."

BC: Any pitcher out there with whom it didn't help to have information?

TG: (Laughing) "Randy Johnson. The more I saw, the worse it got. He could scare you ... flat out scare you."

BC: Let's turn back toward the Hall of Fame. The statue has been unveiled (at Petco Park). What do you think?

TG: "I am honored. It's me. I'm flattered. My mom loved it. And where she was sitting during the unveiling, she couldn't see my dad's quote on the pedestal. I walked her around to see it. To me, that made it perfect. Honestly, I'm humbled. And to the fans. I wish everyone could experience the feeling I had. Talking to that group before the unveiling ... I was touched. And it was like I was speaking from the heart to an old friend. It wasn't a speech. It was me ... Hey, it's me, Tony ... I just want you to know ... "

BC: Come Sunday, there will be all those members of the Hall of Fame behind you on that stage. In your mind, what players are missing?

TG: Goose Gossage, Andre Dawson, Jim Rice, Bert Blyleven, Steve Garvey, Joe Carter, Dale Murphy, Tommy John, Jim Kaat."

BC: We are now into an era where steroids are going to be an issue with every Hall of Fame vote, like they were this year with Mark McGwire. Your thoughts on the subject?

TG: "It makes me sick. This is my game. I wanted Mark in this class. I wish he could have been here. It would have been great. You'd have the power guy (McGwire), the consistent guy (Cal Ripken Jr.) and the Punch-and-Judy guy. I can't tell you when this dark cloud of steroids will go away. But I know it starts with

this class."

BC: Does that lessen the experience at all?

TG: "No, because I think people know I did it the right way. Same for Cal. Which is why I think we got the support we did. I think we were an affirmation of what it should be like."

BC: How big a shadow has steroids cast over baseball?

TG: "People want to know why baseball couldn't have done something faster. It's a fair question. I don't think it helped that during the steroid time, the home run records came under attack and numbers shot through the roof. Numbers that were once held sacred are now under attack. That's not good for the game. But hitters weren't the only players using steroids. There are a lot of factors involved, including the new parks being smaller and all the technology that has gone into improving hitting, like the video."

BC: Barry Bonds?

TG: "Hall of Fame."

BC: But you do have the question of McGwire, Bonds, Rafael Palmeiro and Sammy Sosa.

TG: "It's going to be interesting to see how voters deal with it. There is going to be resistance, as we saw with McGwire. One thing I think we've seen from this is how sacred the game's great numbers are held. That shouldn't be taken lightly. The boat has been rocked. People want to know why we couldn't answer the (steroid) question. And the people are right. Many players are as upset about this as the fans."

BC: But now that there is a policy?

TG: "Time to move on. But fans are always going to question some of these records. I think the 1990s will always be questioned. Sad. That's my era. I've been asked the questions. What can you say? That's the one great thing about my body. (Laughing). Hey, if I used steroids ... "

BC: So we're within a couple of days of the Hall of Fame. What then?

TG: "You know, this has been such a great time. Maybe too busy. I've got some things to do at San Diego State that are being taken care of by other people. But as much as I'm looking forward to the 29th, I'm also looking forward to the 30th. Don't try to find me. I'm going to disappear for a couple weeks. Then I'm going to get back to doing what I do."

BC: So as soon as the speech ends?

TG: "I can't look that far ahead. I've got to focus on that speech. I've got things I want to say. It's written. But mostly, there are target points. You know me. My arms are going to be flying around. I'm going to be emotional. But that's Tony Gwynn."

Online: To view a video slide show of Tony Gwynn through the years, and listen to interviews about Gwynn, go to uniontrib.com/more/gwynn.

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