



Hanes Hosiery youth track team won the 4X100 Hershey State Track Championship held in Raleigh recently. Members of the team (pictured left) included volunteer Mark Worthy, 4X100 members Josh Lytle, André Glenn, Tristan Martin, Steve Williams, Cory McCann, Deron Williams, Bernard Lyons and Coach Greg Bell.

Gwynn, Padres' batsman, collects 3,000th career hit

By BERNIE WILSON
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Tony Gwynn is one consistent guy.

He's played for only one team in his 18-year career, the San Diego Padres. He has hit better than .300 for 16 straight seasons and is tied for Honus Wagner with eight NL batting titles.

He got two hits in his major league debut on July 19, 1982.

Hit No. 1 was a double off Philadelphia's Sid Monge. On the field that night was Pete Rose, who would become baseball's career hit king.

"Rose trailed the play and said, 'Congratulations. Don't catch me in one night,'" Gwynn said. "That's always going to stick with me."

On Friday night at Montreal, Gwynn singled in the first inning for his 3,000th career hit. He finished the game 4-for-5, giving him 3,003 career hits.

He was in a rush to get it, too, having said he wanted to beat longtime contemporary Wade Boggs to the mark. Boggs had 2,997 hits going into Friday night's home game for Tampa Bay against Cleveland.

Gwynn became the 22nd member of the 3,000-hit club, and Boggs is bound to become the 23rd.

But getting to 3,000 wasn't a breeze for Gwynn, 39.

After a hot April, he strained his left calf breaking out of the batter's box on May 21 and ended up making two trips to the disabled list, missing 44 games.

He missed all but two of the Padres' franchise-record 14-game winning streak in late June-early July. Gwynn, one of the most affable and accessible players in the majors, was frustrated — not as much that his drive for 3,000 hit the skids, but because he was missing out on an exciting stretch for the Padres.

"It's been very uncomfortable, very difficult," Gwynn said recently. "I just want to get there as quickly as possible and get back to normal."

Gwynn uttered those words even before Jim Leyritz took a potshot just before he was traded from the Padres to the New York Yankees, hinting that Gwynn wasn't exactly a team player.

The same thing often was said about Boggs, a five-time AL batting champion and left-hander hitter like Gwynn.

In fact, Gwynn tried to imitate Boggs in his early years.

"He was the hitter I wanted to be like," said Gwynn, who won his first batting title the year after Boggs won his first.

"He became the hunted. I wanted to emulate him. So for me, there's a connection because we're both similar in our approach, except that Wade's a

whole lot more patient. He was the guy I had to chase."

For Gwynn, that approach has been to put the ball in play using all fields.

Although it didn't count in his career totals, Gwynn's favorite hit was his homer to right field in the first game of last year's World Series at Yankee Stadium.

Otherwise, Gwynn loves to carve hits the other way. He became so proficient at hitting between third base and shortstop that he began calling it the "5.5 Hole" — in baseball scoring, the third baseman is represented by 5 and the shortstop, 6. Gwynn even has "5.5 Hole" patches on the tongue of his cleats.

Gwynn played basketball and baseball at San Diego State, and it wasn't until his senior season that he decided to stick with baseball.

He loved basketball and thought he might have a shot at the NBA, but didn't start half the games due to an injury suffered the previous summer.

"I was sitting on the bench and thinking, 'I've got to think about my career here.' It just dawned on me that I probably had a better chance at baseball."

And about halfway through my senior year I started sneaking down to the baseball field and hitting in the cage and taking ground balls and stuff. So by the time basketball season ended and I went out to play baseball, I was kind of ready, where before I would just go straight from basketball to baseball.

He was a third-round draft pick of the Padres in June 1981, and made his big league debut a little more than a year later.

Gwynn won his first batting title in 1984. He won the other seven in bunches, from 1987-89, and 1994-97.

As he got older he seemed to get better, never hitting lower than .353 from '93-'97. Last year he fell off to .321, but did hit .500 in the World Series as the Padres were swept by the Yankees.

His best year was 1994, when he was batting .394 when the players' strike began. It was the highest in the majors since Ted Williams batted .406 in 1941.

"At the break I was hitting .383 and was really on a good roll," Gwynn said. "I was hitting the ball hard and using all fields. If I was going to hit .400, I knew that was going to be my best crack at it. Unfortunately for me and everyone else, we didn't finish the season."

"For me, that was the year I was doing a whole lot of things right."

For a guy who's hit .339 for his career — the best among active big leaguers — a lot of people would say he's done a whole lot of things right.



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