

COLLECTING WITH JEFF JEFF FIGLER

## Padres Hall of Famer Tony Gwynn a legend whose time has come

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One of San Diego's finest ambassadors, Tony Gwynn, was voted into baseball's Hall of Fame earlier this month.

Gwynn played for only one team, the San Diego Padres, for his 20 years in the majors, retiring to a thunderous standing ovation from fans in 2001. That's a rarity in leagues where teams change rosters as often as TV networks change programs. Today, you can still catch him at the field, coaching San Diego State's Aztecs baseball team.

Kids may not have seen Gwynn play but they certainly have heard their parents talk about him. They can look at the record book and see that he was a 16-year All Star, led the National League in batting eight times, and amassed 3,141 hits. Not bad. Not bad at all.

No matter what item you have his signature affixed to, consider it a prized possession, one that should grow in value after he is inducted into the Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, N.Y., in July.

Aside from his impressive baseball stats, there's another element at work here – one that doesn't come with a dollars-and-cents price, but with plenty of growing nostalgia and interest for San Diego fans.



JOHN GASTALDO / Union-Tribune

From an autographed baseball, to a signed helmet to a jersey (shown with one worn by Stan Musial) and a magazine, Tony Gwynn baseball memorabilia has been given a boost by his upcoming induction into baseball's Hall of Fame.

It is well known that Gwynn had several opportunities to go to other teams to play for more money, but he was committed to play in San Diego, his home.

And he has given to San Diego not only with his play, but also with his time. He and his wife Alicia have established the TAG Foundation that benefits underprivileged children.

For this work, in 1995 Gwynn was presented the Branch Rickey Award for community service and in 1999 he was inducted into the Humanitarian Hall of Fame.

For these reasons, a home-grown sports legend like Tony Gwynn carries extra meaning to San Diego sports collectors. Through him, they have an opportunity to possess an important piece of history, not only baseball history, but San Diego history.

In this day and age when athletes far from the caliber of Gwynn charge a king's ransom for an autograph, it has always been a breath of fresh air to see Tony Gwynn sign items for free.

It is also refreshing to be able to read his signature. I'm not kidding. With most players, you feel as though they are just scribbling their name and have no interest in what they are doing. Not so with Mr. Padre. His autograph is as legible as his warmth is genuine. Time after time he will sign anything, be it balls, photos, scraps of paper or ticket stubs, until everyone, kids and adults alike, is satisfied. Rarely has there been a disparaging remark said about him not signing for someone.

Be glad if you are one of the lucky ones who has a Tony Gwynn item. However, keep in mind that many Gwynn items are plentiful, and therefore not worth as much as if they were rare.

If you're just starting collecting, get your Gwynn items soon. According to Scott Malack of Coaches Corner Memorabilia in Souderton, Pa., any item of a Hall of Famer can easily double in value.

A new Gwynn-signed baseball can probably be had for about \$45. A signed photo will set you back about \$35.

Of course, the condition of the item factors into the cost.

A Gwynn-signed, game-used glove may very well cost upward of a thousand dollars, and a game-used jersey will now set you back a few thousand dollars. Even signed baseball cards or balls have greatly increased in value.

Places to look: You might want to track down an old Gwynn baseball card by calling Kit Young Cards at (858) 259-1300 or Larry Fritsch Cards at (715) 344-8687.

But what you really might want to do is to send a ball or a photo to Tony Gwynn himself in care of the San Diego State University baseball team. If you do that, please include enough postage to return the item to you.

You might be surprised that in a few weeks you might very well be returned your item with his signature on it – for free. Now, what would the value of that item be to you? Priceless.