

Drug-free Gwynn laments place in steroids era

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Hall of Fame baseball player Tony Gwynn is arguably the finest pure hitter of the modern era, boasting a career average of .338 and sharing the National League record with eight batting titles.

Perhaps most importantly in an era increasingly judged by whether players achieved their results without the help of performance-enhancing drugs, there is nothing to suggest it wasn't pure Tony.

But Gwynn lamented at Friday's Iowa Cubs FanFest luncheon at Des Moines' Hy-Vee Hall that the suspicion of steroid use was widespread in Major League Baseball well before the recent Mitchell Report — and that few, if any, did anything about it.

"We're all guilty," Gwynn said. "We all suspected and we're all guilty."

Former U.S. Sen. George Mitchell issued a report in December after a nearly two-year investigation linking pitching great Roger Clemens and more than 80 others to the illegal use of steroids and other performance-enhancing drugs.

Major League Baseball on Friday launched a department of investigations, a permanent branch of the commissioner's office responsible for looking into drug use in the sport — one of Mitchell's recommendations.

Talk about performance-enhancing drugs has continued around baseball circles, including Friday in Des Moines by Gwynn, whose career average is the highest of any player who began his career after World War II.

Gwynn said many, if not all, of today's greats and those from the recent past could be branded by the era in which they played.

"I'm part of the steroids era," he said. "That's what people are going to think 50 years from now when they see my plaque at Cooperstown. I'm part of an era where performance-enhancing drugs were present."

Baseball banned steroids in 2002.

Gwynn said he did not use any performance-enhancing substances during his career, which spanned from 1982-2001. Nor, Gwynn said, did any players admit to him that they used steroids during that time.

But he said there was suspicion at all levels of the game that something wasn't right as record after record began to fall in the late 1990s.

"You suspected, but what recourse did you have?" Gwynn said. "I was a player rep myself, and I remember guys bringing the topic up, but what were you going to do? There were no rules in place. There wasn't anything."

Gwynn, now the coach at San Diego State and whose son Tony Jr. plays in the Milwaukee Brewers organization, believes harsh penalties and stricter testing now in place will help clean up the game.

College teams are subject to testing with no advance warning. That likely will be the case in the major leagues soon.

“And you know what?” Gwynn said. “The best thing about it is that there’s testing — not only for steroids, but for amphetamines, and those other things that are out there.”

Des Moines-area umpires Mike Everitt and Eric Cooper — also at Friday’s FanFest event — said they were not among those who suspected rampant steroid use.

“You’d turn on SportsCenter and they’d be talking about (the steroids issue), then you’d see a player walking across the field, and maybe it would cross your mind,” Everitt said. “But I’m telling you, when you’re on the field, and you’re trying to focus on your job, I never had that thought cross my mind, ‘Man, there’s something going on with him.’ ”

Gwynn said prevention should be baseball’s focus now, as ex-Cardinals slugger Mark McGwire suggested before a congressional committee investigating steroids in 2005.

McGwire refused to answer questions about his personal involvement, however, and twice has been denied election into the Hall of Fame.

“Looking back on it, a lot of the stuff Mark McGwire was saying at the congressional hearings is making sense now,” Gwynn said. “He was saying, there’s not any sense in looking in the past. Let’s look forward and try to do something about this.”