

## Umpiring Camp for Marines

Former Padres great and San Diego State manager Tony Gwynn held an impromptu chat on Monday morning with a group of prospective umpires on a field adjacent to the campus stadium that bears his name.

"Take charge," said the Hall of Famer and .336 lifetime hitter in his 19 seasons with San Diego, a career that ended in 2001. "Control the game. Take charge of the game. It's your game. We'll follow."

It was no ordinary group of umpires listening to Major League ump Hunter Wendelstedt describe how to judge the strike zone. The event was the first of its kind -- a free, one-day umpiring camp conducted by Major League Baseball's Umpiring Dept. in an effort to train members of the U.S. Marines in the fine art of calling a game.

The camp was coordinated by MLB's Department of Baseball Operations with the idea of giving members of the military -- who already have the discipline and the focus -- to take advantage of the rare opportunity to transfer those skills to umpiring.

The next step for those interested is an invitation to the annual one-week school of umpiring, staged at baseball's Urban Youth Academy in Compton, Calif. This year, it will be held from Nov. 8-15.

Monday's six-hour camp, with 80 recruits moving from station to station, occurred only hours before Cuba played Mexico at downtown PETCO Park in a World Baseball Classic second-round elimination game.

It brought out the best intentions of those who make their living working in baseball's most prestigious league.

"My goal is just to chip in and give a little bit back to these kids who are fighting for our country," Wendelstedt said. "I know I have a game to do tonight, but what do I care? Some of these guys are back from second tours in Iraq. For me to say, 'No,' that would've been ridiculous.

"A lot of these kids are going to come back from the desert and need to find a job. If they're not good enough to play baseball, umpiring may be a way."

Wendelstedt, whose father Harry umpired in the National League for more than three decades, was joined by fellow umps Ted Barrett, Bill Miller and Joe West, all of whom have been assigned this week to call World Baseball Classic games. Former umpire Bruce Froemming was also among the group.

The military umpiring camp was the brainchild of U.S. Marine Major Mike Gervasoni, a 20-year veteran who attended MLB's yearly gathering of Major League umpires in January in Arizona, said Rich Rieker, a supervisor of MLB umpires.

"[Gervasoni] came up to me on Day 6 and said, 'I've noticed a lot of parallels in the skill set,'" Rieker said. "'I've noticed a lot of parallels in how we train Marines and how you train umpires -- decisions, enforcing rules, taking orders and being in shape.' He wondered if we could do something with them and here we are."

And Gervasoni was jazzed by the turnout.

"This is a great way to start," Gervasoni said. "We can do some wonderful things. This definitely has potential."

The long-range goal is take the one-day camp global with visits to U.S. military bases all over the world.

In addition, a group of sports business students at San Diego State helped organize the project, with the aid of the Padres and MLB.

"This is the result of a lot of hard work," said Jimmie Lee Solomon, MLB's executive vice president of baseball operations. "The idea for us to try to bolster our pipeline with good, quality individuals who have a desire to be an umpire or maybe didn't know they had the skill set to be an umpire.

"We believe that Marines, especially, have the same type of makeup that would make for a good umpire. So we think this group will be very beneficial to us in the long run."