

*Twelve kids from Green, Ohio set out to win the Hot Stove State Championship. A true story of baseball, friendship, and memories that still shine decades later.*

## **Green Giants: A Journey to a State Championship**

By Andy Rasicci

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# GREEN GIANTS

## A Journey to a State Championship



**Andrew Rasicci**

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# Table of Contents

References & Sources.....	ix
Foreword.....	xi
Chapter 1: The Birth of the Green Giants .....	1
Chapter 2: Building a Contender.....	5
Chapter 3: The Unforgettable Opener .....	9
Chapter 4: LA Star Tournament.....	13
Chapter 5: The Start of League Play .....	19
Chapter 6: League Play Continues .....	21
Chapter 7: The Green Tournament.....	25
Chapter 8: A Championship Heartbreaker .....	29
Chapter 9: The Patton Tournament .....	33
Chapter 10: The Dog Days of League Play.....	37
Chapter 11: The Fish! .....	39
Chapter 12: A Non-League Rival.....	41
Chapter 13: League Champs .....	43
Chapter 14: The Jackson Tournament – The Final Tuneup .....	49
Chapter 15: The District Gauntlet .....	55
Chapter 16: Survive and Advance – The Trumbull Regional .....	59
Chapter 17: State Final 4 .....	65
Chapter 18: Player Awards.....	71
Afterword: Beyond The Giants .....	77

# CHAPTER 1:

## THE BIRTH OF THE GREEN GIANTS

In the small town of Green, Ohio, where summer evenings echoed with the crack of the bat and the cheers from the stands, a team was about to be put together, one that would go on to leave its mark in local baseball lore. They'd eventually be known as the Green Giants, but they didn't start as a powerhouse. They were first a collection of All-Stars plucked from the Green Recreational League. Years later, Coach Jim Bowen would state that it was not just the best players who would be selected, but a combination of the best players who were good kids and had good parents.

It all began at the end of the recreational season, during the league's postseason tournament. Coach Bowen's White Sox had just won the H League Championship, edging out the Angels under the lights in a classic title game. This is where the formation of what would become the Green Giants began. Three key players from that championship squad—JT Warmus, Anthony Bowen, and Ben Lawson, were selected to represent the league on an All-Star team. Joining them from the Angels, the team that the White Sox had just beaten in the championship, were Andy Rasicci and Jimmy Mueller. Zach Hale, the talented catcher from the Diamondbacks, who went undefeated in the regular season, would also be joining the Giants. The Diamondbacks had two other great players who would not be joining the postseason team but would prove to be vital members of the Giants in later years, Chris Hessedense and Billy Dodd. Zach's father, Coach of the Diamondbacks, Brian Hale, would join the All-Star coaching staff, a move that proved invaluable down the road. Coach Hale and Coach Bowen complemented each other perfectly; what one didn't specialize in, the other did. Coach Hale was what you would call a "Player Coach," yet everyone was scared to take ground balls from him. The way he mashed those ground balls made even the best infielders a little nervous in pregame warmups. Twenty-four years later, Cory Muller

still commented on how Coach Hale was “jacked” and would kick his ass. And everyone knew this to be true.

From the Reds came Alex Stevanov and Cameron Carris, two solid additions who brought consistency and grit. Jason Malloy, a standout from the Blue Jays, rounded out the core of what would soon become the Green Giants. (And yes, Jason’s teammate Bin Hurgist somehow got snubbed, just like he later would in high school. Gotta love the buddy system.)

This initial group didn’t yet carry the name “Green Giants,” but the foundation was set. The All-Star team was designed as a one-time postseason unit, a way to reward standout players with the opportunity to compete at a higher level. They made the most of it, winning the tournament and catching the attention of more than a few in the Green baseball community that fall.

But when the dust settled and the trophies were handed out, Coach Bowen saw something more. This wasn’t just a talented group; they had chemistry, toughness, and a hunger to play the game the right way. So the bold decision was made: turn this one-off All-Star team into a legitimate travel team, playing in an elevated league against tougher teams.

In their first full season together, the newly formed Green Giants entered the 12U Hot Stove Division—a division technically for older kids, meaning they’d be playing up in age against stronger, more seasoned competition. They finished that inaugural season around .500, a more-than-respectable result considering the circumstances. It wasn’t always easy, but every game served as a lesson.

There were growing pains, of course, but there were also flashes of brilliance. No moment captured this better than their showdown with the Green Gators, a squad made up of older players, including two of the top 11-year-olds in the area, Kade Wagner and Derek Marshal.

Nobody gave the Giants much of a chance. But with ace Jason Malloy on the mound, they built a surprising lead and carried a three-run advantage into the bottom of the seventh inning. Just one out away from pulling off a huge upset, the Giants looked poised to shock the local baseball world.

That was until Sean Rich stepped into the batter's box. An eighth grader built like a body builder with elite speed, Rich was the Gators' most feared hitter. He could also fly, as he was the star running back for the middle school football team coached by the great Mr. Lazor. Malloy challenged him with a series of fastballs, but Rich wasn't rattled. With one mighty swing, he sent the ball screaming down the right field line for an inside-the-park home run that cleared the bases and tied the game.

The stunned silence from the Giants' dugout said it all.

The game went into extras, and though the Giants fought hard, the Gators ultimately walked away with a one-run victory. It was a heartbreakin loss, but it wasn't just a defeat; it was a turning point. The Giants had gone toe-to-toe with a veteran team and nearly pulled it off. They had proven they could counterpunch with the heavyweights.

That game would come to symbolize everything about the team's first year: they were raw, they were unproven, but they had fight. And most importantly, they belonged.

As the season ended and the players looked ahead to another year, there was a growing belief that this team had something special. What began as a patchwork All-Star team had evolved into a tight-knit group with real potential.

They weren't just a group of talented kids anymore.

They were the Green Giants.

At the same time, the Giants were playing in the Hot Stove League, the Green Recreational League was still up and running. Although many of the Giants' players were no longer in the league, future Giants players were still dominating it. Like the year prior, Chris Hessedence's team, the Marlins, went undefeated in the regular season, absolutely demolishing teams with the way they "mashed the baseball." In the championship game, Hessedence and company would run up against the Red Sox, led by another future Giant, Billy Dodd. Billy was joined by future Green Gladiators Chris Korman, Rob Davis, and Zach Fetchu. Hessedence's team reminded me of the 2007 Patriots with the way they demolished everyone in the regular season, but then came up short in the championship game, as Billy Dodd came in to slam the door shut and pick up the title. The Kormans thought instituting the "quick pitch" would be an effective strategy because the Marlins' players took their time during each at-bat, "stepping out like they were MLB players." The quick pitch appeared to work like a charm, and weeks later, Chris Korman still remembers an article in the Green Leader or Suburbanite saying, "Congratulations on an undefeated regular season and runner-up in the championship game, in which their opponent colluded with the umpires to cost them the title."

## CHAPTER 2: BUILDING A CONTENDER

After wrapping up the 2000 season with a .500 record, the Green Giants had every reason to feel optimistic. They had just gone toe-to-toe with mostly 12-year-old teams despite being 11-year-olds themselves. But Coach Jim Bowen saw more than just optimism; he saw potential. And not just "Let's get better next year" potential. In true Coach Bowen fashion, he envisioned something bigger.

"In most games," Coach Bowen would later say, "I thought we were the better team. We just lacked some maturity and game awareness. There's a lot of growth that happens between the ages of 11 and 12." He believed that with the right development, this group could do more than compete. They could win it all.

That belief only strengthened with the addition of a few key pieces.

Enter Cory Muller. Coach Bowen first spotted Cory in a chance encounter at a soccer game. Coach Bowen just happened to be in the right place at the right time and talked to Cory's mom, Sally. She asked who the baseball coach was, and Coach Bowen said, "You are talking to him!" The big right-handed pitcher from Canfield came into Green for an individual tryout at one of the local softball fields. And when he took the mound, everyone's jaws collectively dropped. He threw harder than anyone on the Giants' pitching staff, including ace Jason Malloy. Cory was built like a 9th grader (in 6th grade) and had a fastball to match. His hitting during the tryout?

Eh, not memorable. But it didn't matter. The kid could pitch. After the mini tryout, Sally asked Jim when the "real tryout would be." No real tryout would be necessary; Cory had made the team after one pitch.

The Giants also welcomed Chris Hessedence, a power-hitting slugger who had made noise a few years prior with the 1999 Diamondbacks team that had gone undefeated in the regular season under now-Giants assistant coach Brian Hale. The following year, Hessedence would play for the Marlins, who again would go undefeated in the regular season. Chris had legit pop in his bat and serious size that even intimidated his own teammates. He was by far the most feared hitter in all of Green.

Billy Dodd, widely regarded as one of the best 11-year-olds in the area, was another late addition. Fresh off his championship with the Red Sox 1 year earlier, Billy was confident he would belong with an older team. He would also hold bragging rights over his new teammate, Hessedence, although no one would dare use those bragging rights against Hess.

With the core returning and the roster bolstered, the Giants were starting to look dangerous. But before the first pitch of 2001, the team held their first official meeting at, of all places, the Green Public Library.

Coach Bowen gathered the players and parents to go over the important stuff: league fees, uniforms, fundraising, and schedules. The usual. Most of the players tuned these things out, probably wondering why this meeting didn't involve bats or balls. But then Coach Bowen said something that snapped everyone to attention:

“The goal this season is to win the Hot Stove State Championship.”

Andy Rasicci and Alex Stevanov could remember locking eyes in confusion. State championship? We just went .500 a few months ago. Were they hearing this right?

Years later, Coach Bowen would explain:

“I knew if we cleaned up the mental errors and kept developing the fundamentals, we had the talent and athleticism to do something special.

And I've always believed in setting lofty goals. If you're going to dream, dream big."

Weeks after that first meeting, the team gathered again, this time at the Warmus Ranch. Not for practice. Not even for a team party. This was something different: Baseball Chalk Talk.

Down in the Warmus basement, the pool table was transformed into a chalkboard of sorts. Each numbered ball represented a position on the field, and Coach Bowen walked the players through real game situations. Who backs up what? Where does the shortstop go on a throw home? What's the left fielder's job on a single to right?

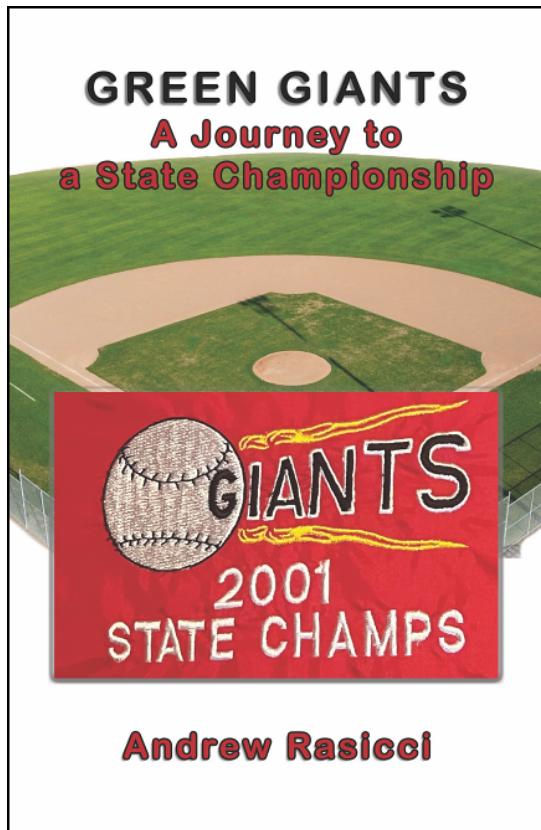
The answer was always the same: everyone has a job. No standing around. No taking plays off. At age 12, this was next-level baseball education, and most teams weren't getting anything close.

This was the beginning of what would be dubbed the "Skull Sessions." Coach Bowen brought this same teaching mentality to postgame outfield meetings.

"I know not everyone loved them," Bowen admitted years later. "Especially after a blowout win. But I always felt it was important to learn something from every game, win or lose. I'd usually point out three things we didn't do well, then finish with something we did right. In 2001, our players and coaches were just smarter all-around than the year before."

Smarter. Sharper. Hungrier.

And with that, the 2001 Green Giants weren't just a summer baseball team anymore. They were on a mission. The players voted on their motto for the season, and they put it on their undershirts that could also double as uniforms on hot days: Just Shut up and Play Ball!



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