

## **Cabarrus Top Gun Sports and AAU Deliver Major League Talent**

**By Jason Huddle**

It's hard to imagine some of Major League Baseball's top players, like 2014 League MVP, Madison Bumgarner, got their start playing on the little league fields of America. What's even harder to realize is that Bumgarner, who was born in Hickory, NC, played a lot of his ball right here in Cabarrus County as a youth. At only six years' old, Madison began playing the sport he now calls a career and is, arguably one of the best to ever play the game. By the age of nine, he began to play with an AAU team that frequented Donnie Broome's Concord tournaments.

It wasn't long until Madison gained the attention of a former minor league player and he was still only 11 years' old. Even then, the possibility of Bumgarner going straight to the Major Leagues was being discussed as a possibility.

Bumgarner, a southpaw pitcher, would go on to win with his AAU team, a high school 4A state title and then drafted straight out of high school by the San Francisco Giants with the 10<sup>th</sup> overall pick on the 2007 Major League draft.

However, he didn't exactly go straight to the Major League organization where he would go on to win the 2014 World Series and Series MVP honors as a starting pitcher for the San Francisco Giants. Bumgarner spent the 2008 season as a member of the Class A South Atlantic League Augusta Green Jackets. He would again find himself playing on Cabarrus County soil, this time playing against the Kannapolis Intimidators during the course of that season, on his way to winning the league triple crown.

The next season, he would make his Major League debut with the Giants. Only a year after that, he would become the youngest left-handed pitcher to throw eight scoreless innings in a World Series as the Giants won the 2010 title, their first since 1954.

Over the next three seasons, Bumgarner continued to improve his skills and ultimately became the Giants' opening day pitcher for the 2014 season, which culminated in another world Series title and Bumgarner taking series MVP honors.

In addition, during the 2014 season, Bumgarner became the first pitcher to hit two grand slams in a season since Tony Cloninger in 1966. He also won pitcher of the month honors in both May and August. He also set career-highs in wins and strikeouts. He went 18-10, posting a 2.98 ERA, and set a Giants single-season strikeout record by a left-handed pitcher with 219.

In December, 2014 Bumgarner was named Sports Illustrated Sportsman of the Year. Not bad for a kid from a place known as "Bumtown", right?

And interesting fact is that Bumgarner is not alone by a longshot as a former AAU or Top Gun Sports athlete to go on to Major League success.

Another such example is that of the 18<sup>th</sup> overall pick in the 2012 draft by the Los Angeles Dodgers, Corey Seager, who began his baseball career playing on the fields of Hartsell Sports Complex in Concord, NC, as a member of Top Gun Sports.

The younger brother of Seattle Mariners infielder, Kyle Seager, Corey played for Northwest Cabarrus High School in Concord. Even before that, he was participating in Top Gun tournaments on a regular basis. The training and skills he developed on those teams paved the way for him to receive a \$2.35 million signing bonus in order to sign with the Dodgers instead of taking a scholarship to the University of South Carolina.

Seager has not enjoyed quite the same success as Bumgarner, as he has yet to make it to the Major Leagues. However, he still has enjoyed great success at the minor-league level. In his first season, with the Ogden Raptors of the Pioneer League, he hit .309 in 46 games. He was quickly moved up to the Class-A Great Lakes Loons of the Midwest League in 2013. There, Seager hit .309 with 12 homers and 57 RBIs in 74 games for Great Lakes and moved up again in August of the same season.

During the 2014 season Seager hit .352 with 18 homers and 70 RBIs and was selected to the mid-season California League All-Star team and played for the USA team at the 2014 All-Star Futures Game. Again, he was promoted to the Class-AA Southern League. There, he played in 38 games and hit .345.

He was named the MVP of the California League for 2014. He was also selected to Baseball America's minor league All-Star team. In September, the Dodgers announced that Seager was the co-winner, along with Joc Pederson, of the organization's "Minor League Player of the Year" award.

Incidentally, older brother, Kyle, who is also from Concord, NC and played in several local tournaments as well, has had a successful career with the Mariners. Just this past December, after winning his first Golden Glove, Kyle signed a 7-year, \$100 million dollar contract extension to remain with the club.

Finally, a third example of top-level talent that developed their skills on the Cabarrus County Top Gun and AAU fields is that of Dustin Ackley. As a teenager, Ackley was a member of the 13u National Champion Kernersville Cardinals in 2001.

Ackley spent most of his high school career at South Stokes High School, in Walnut Cove, NC where he pitched and played third base. He was named Conference Player of the Year as a junior. He also helped South Stokes to North Carolina 1A state titles in 2003 and 2004. He then spent his senior year at North Forsyth High School, in Forsyth County, NC. There, he earned preseason and postseason Louisville Slugger All-American honors as a senior.

Unlike Bumgarner and Seager, Ackley decided to go on to college before pursuing his pro career, by playing for the University of North Carolina. At Carolina, Ackley set Carolina single-season records and led the nation with 119 hits, 296 at-bats and 73 games played. He started all 73 games, including 65 at first base. He hit .402 to become just the fifth Tar Heel to bat over .400

in a single season. His 74 runs set a UNC rookie record. He was then named the national freshman of the year and claimed the S.H. Basnight Award as Carolina's most valuable position player.

Ackley followed up his stellar freshman season with an even more brilliant sophomore effort, batting .417 on the season with a school-record 82 runs scored, seven home runs, 51 RBI and 19 stolen bases. He ranks as the only player in Carolina history to hit over .400 twice in a career and also posted Carolina top-10 single-season totals in hits, walks, total bases and at-bats.

Ackley played in the 2007, 2008 and 2009 College World Series. As a result, he has the most hits in NCAA history in the College World Series.

Finally, in 2009, Ackley entered the 2009 Major League Baseball Draft. He was subsequently selected second overall by the Seattle Mariners and signed a five-year major league deal worth \$7.5 million dollars, including a \$6 million dollar bonus and \$1.5 million dollars in guaranteed money, with another \$2.5 million dollars possible in salary, depending on how quickly he reached the majors.

Ackley was assigned to the Arizona Fall League and would ultimately be named League MVP. The following season, he was moved up to play second base for the Mariners' Southern League affiliate, West Tenn Diamond Jaxx.

Dustin did not have to wait long for the call-up. In June, 2011, Ackley stepped on to the field for the first time as a major league player for the Seattle Mariners. He then hit a single against the Philadelphia Phillies with his first at-bat. He later finished the season with a .273 average as he was voted MVP of the Seattle Mariners by the Seattle Chapter of the Baseball Writers Association of America.

In May, 2014, Ackley recorded his first grand slam against the Toronto Blue Jays. Although he has struggled to maintain the consistency of production he saw in college and the minor leagues, Ackley continues to play for the Mariners organization to this day.

The list of similar stories of players whose humble beginnings began right here on the AAU and Top Gun fields of Cabarrus County, NC goes on and on. In fact, you can access a full list of players from this area, who have gone on to sign professional contracts, by visiting [http://playtopgunsports.com/CustomPageInfo/top\\_gun\\_majors.pdf](http://playtopgunsports.com/CustomPageInfo/top_gun_majors.pdf).