



THE BIG HORN RAMS

A Franchise History of The Big League — 2001 to 2031

Fifteen Octobers. Two finals. No trophy. A sound in the valley that settles nothing.

In the style of Geoffrey C. Ward

PROLOGUE

The Sound in the Valley

In the Bighorn Mountains, in the late weeks of autumn, two rams will square off on a slope above the treeline, rear back on their hind legs, and come down against each other with a crack that carries the length of the valley.

People who hear it for the first time stop whatever they are doing. It does not sound like an animal. It sounds like timber giving way, or a rifle, or something structural coming apart, and the ranchers below will tell you that the first time they heard it they went out to see what had broken. Nothing had. The two rams back away from each other, shake it off, and do it again. And again. Sometimes for the better part of an afternoon. The sound rolls down the draws and off the rock and out over the plain toward Sheridan, and everyone within five miles knows that something enormous is being decided up there.

Almost nothing is being decided up there.

This is the story of a baseball club that has played thirty-one seasons in The Big League, has been to October fifteen times, has won nine division flags, has stood one series away from the championship on two separate occasions, and has never once carried a trophy home. It is the story of a franchise that ran out of California and reassembled itself in a town of eighteen thousand people at the foot of a mountain range, and then spent two decades making the loudest sound in the Fire Conference.

The collision is real. The Rams have never been a soft team, never a lucky one, never a fraud. They have been, for most of their history, exactly as good as they looked. What they have not been is finished.

I

Golden State

2001 – 2004

The franchise entered the league in 2001 as the Golden State Captains, a charter member, and it took three years to become anything at all.

The first two summers were the flat kind: 81-81, then 80-82, a club that could beat anybody once and nobody twice. What it had, and what it did not yet know how to use, was a first baseman named Mike Wilson, who arrived in the first season and hit .319, and then .303, and gave the Captains something almost no charter roster has, which is a player nobody has to make excuses for.

The general manager was a man named Clayton, and in 2003 the thing he had been building came together all at once. Golden State won ninety-two games and the division. Mike Wilson hit .333 with twenty-two home runs and ninety-three runs batted in, produced better than nine wins above replacement, and was named Most Valuable Player of the Fire Conference. Danny Favila, who had lost twenty games in the franchise's first season without ever pitching badly, went 17-7 with an earned run average of 2.42. The Captains went to October in the first year they were ever good.

They lost in the first round.

They came back in 2004, won eighty-seven, took a wild card, and lost in the first round again. Favila went 18-7 with the same 2.42. Wilson hit .336 in ninety-nine games. It was, on the evidence, the beginning of something.

It was the end of it.

II

The Fall

2005 – 2009

What happened next happened fast, and the front office came apart before the roster did.

Clayton was gone during the 2005 season. A man named Dave took the chair and held it for a year. Then Matt, briefly. Then Johnny, who arrived in the back half of 2006 and inherited a club in free fall. Three general managers in eighteen months is not a strategy; it is a symptom.

Mike Wilson left after 2005 and hit .347 for San Diego the following summer. Favila's arm went. The Captains lost ninety-four games in 2005, a hundred and two in 2006, ninety-eight in 2007, a hundred and five in 2008, and a hundred and six in 2009 — five consecutive losing seasons, four of them by margins that do not admit of interpretation. The 2009 club, at 56-106, remains the worst in franchise history.

There were fragments worth keeping. Hyun-jun Kim won Gold Gloves in 2002 and 2005. Albert Prejean hit a hundred and thirty-nine home runs across five summers on teams that could not use them. Rick LaVasseur took a Silver Slugger in 2007. These are the things a franchise collects when it has stopped collecting wins.

And then, in the winter after the 2009 season, the Golden State Captains ceased to exist.

Sheridan

2010 – 2013

The club moved to Big Horn, Wyoming, and took the name Rams, and it is worth pausing on the arithmetic of that decision, because nothing else in the league's history resembles it.

Golden State had been a metropolitan franchise, a market of millions, and it had drawn poorly and finished last and burned through four general managers in a decade. Sheridan County holds fewer people than most big-league ballparks hold on a Tuesday. Rams Fieldhouse was built for forty-five thousand in a town that could not fill it from within a hundred miles. On every conventional measure it was a step down and off a cliff.

It worked immediately.

Johnny — who had taken over in the worst month of the worst era and simply refused to leave — had spent the losing years accumulating. The 2010 Rams, in their first Wyoming summer, won seventy-nine games, which was twenty-three more than the club had won the year before. Matt Shelton arrived that season and would pitch ten years in Big Horn, more than any pitcher in franchise history. In 2011 the Rams won eighty-two, took a wild card, beat one team and then another, and lost the conference championship series. It was the deepest run the franchise had ever made and it happened in year two of a relocation.

Then 2012.

The First Collision: 2012

The 2012 Big Horn Rams won ninety-five games and the division, and then played an October unlike any other in franchise history.

They won the wild card round. They won the divisional round. They won the conference championship series. And in each of those three series, the Most Valuable Player was the same man: Joey Ehrenkranz, a rookie center fielder who had come up the previous September, won the Fire Conference Rookie of the Year award, taken a Gold Glove, and then put together the single most concentrated October any Ram has ever had. Three series, three trophies, in his first full season.

Kelly Laukaitis won a Silver Slugger. Adam Schmidt and Nick Kennedy won Gold Gloves. Matt Shelton went 15-13 and gave the rotation its spine.

And in the Big League Championship Series, the Rams met the Denver Dynamite, who had won the title the year before, and lost.

They came back in 2013 and won ninety-six, the most in franchise history to that point, and got as far as the conference championship series before it ended. Justin Marshall won two series MVP awards on the way. Tony Aponte won a Silver Slugger.

Three straight Octobers. Two conference championship series. One trip to the final. And a room that, on the last day of 2013, had every reason to believe it had only started.

IV

The Middle Distance

2014 – 2021

It had, in fact, finished.

The eight seasons that followed produced one postseason berth and not a single ninety-win summer. The Rams did not collapse the way Golden State had collapsed — there was no hundred-loss year, no fire sale, no third general manager in a season. Johnny stayed. The club simply settled into the seventies and stayed there: 72-90, then 76-86, 79-83, 79-84, 76-86, 74-88, 72-90.

The one exception was 2017, when seventy-nine wins was somehow enough for a wild card, and Jim Young won a series MVP as the Rams took the first round and went out in the second. It is the smallest good year in franchise history and it is remembered fondly, which tells you something about the seven around it.

What was actually happening in those years was slower than the standings could show. Matt Shelton kept taking the ball, year after year, through a decade in which the club behind him was rarely worth the effort — a hundred and ten wins, a hundred and sixty-nine starts, more innings than any Ram has thrown. Phil Harrison played nine seasons and twelve hundred games, most of them for teams that finished fifth. Roland Bale won a Silver Slugger in 2016. Seth Comparato won one in 2018. Aaron Musgrave came up in 2020 and won a Gold Glove five years later.

And in 2021 the Rams won eighty-three games and finished third, and nobody outside Wyoming noticed, and it was the beginning of the best run the franchise has ever had.

V

The Second Charge

2022 – 2025

The Second Collision: 2022

The 2022 Rams won eighty-eight games. It was not a dominant season. It produced the deepest October the club had had in a decade, and the second and last time the franchise has played for a championship.

Big Horn won the wild card round, with Justin McPeak taking series honors. They won the divisional round, with Brian Johnston taking series honors. They won the conference championship series, with Dave Shafer — who had also won a Silver Slugger that year — taking series honors. Raul Rodriguez, in his first season in Wyoming, went 10-5 with a 2.90 earned run average and gave the staff a front end it had lacked since Shelton's prime. Roger Gonzalez won a Gold Glove.

And in the Big League Championship Series, ten years after the first time, the Rams met the Denver Dynamite, and lost.

The same opponent. The same round. The same result. Denver had by then become the fixed obstacle of this franchise's history in a way that is almost too neat to be true: the Dynamite won the title in 2011, the year Big Horn's first deep run ended; in 2012, when the Rams reached the final; in 2022, when they reached it again; in 2023, 2028 and 2031, in each of which Big Horn played in October and Denver finished the month with the trophy.

What followed 2022 was the finest stretch of baseball the franchise has ever played. The 2023 Rams won a hundred and one games and the division, with Bob Smith taking a Silver Slugger and a series MVP and Rodriguez going 13-4. The 2024 Rams won a hundred and two — still the best record in franchise history — with Shafer taking his second Silver Slugger and Musgrave a Gold Glove. The 2025 Rams won ninety-eight and a third consecutive division flag, and Bob Smith carried them through the divisional round and into the conference championship series.

Three hundred and one wins in three years. Three division titles. And the club got no closer to a championship in any of them than it had in 2022, or in 2012.

Raymond

2026 – 2031

The 2026 season broke the streak: eighty wins, fourth place, no October. It is the only losing summer the Rams have had since 2021, and the man who ended it had appeared in sixty-eight games the year before.

Bill Raymond came up in 2027 and hit .263 in a partial season on a ninety-four-win division winner. In 2028 he played a hundred and thirty-one games, hit thirty-two home runs, won a Silver Slugger and a wild card series MVP. And then he did something no player in the history of this franchise had done, and very few in the history of the league have done.

Three Autumns of Bill Raymond

In 2029 Raymond played all one hundred and sixty-one games, hit .308 with fifty home runs and a hundred and twenty-three runs batted in, produced nearly eleven wins above replacement, won a Silver Slugger and a Gold Glove, and was named Most Valuable Player of the Fire Conference.

In 2030 he hit .289 with thirty-nine home runs and was named Most Valuable Player of the Fire Conference.

In 2031 he hit .286 with forty-five home runs and was named Most Valuable Player of the Fire Conference.

Three consecutive MVP awards. Around him, the rest of the room filled in: Danny Hess, who hit better than .300 in back-to-back seasons and drove in nearly five hundred runs across six years; Josh Ferguson, who arrived in 2028 and won a Silver Slugger in each of his first two summers; Steve Schwarz; Brian Cronk, who went 21-4 with a 2.20 earned run average in 2029; Nick Williams, who won the Fire Conference Cy Young Award in 2030 with a 14-5 season and a 2.54 earned run average; Travis Sudduth, who arrived from Phoenix in the last weeks of the 2031 season, went 7-0 with a 2.09 earned run average in Wyoming, and won the Fire Conference Cy Young Award on a 16-6 season split between the two clubs.

The Rams won ninety-three in 2028, ninety-eight in 2029, eighty-eight in 2030, ninety-eight in 2031. They went to October in all four. They won a wild card round in 2028, in 2030 and in 2031, and they did not reach the Big League Championship Series in any of them.

A three-time conference Most Valuable Player, two Cy Young Award winners in consecutive years, four straight postseason berths, and nothing on the wall.

What the Collision Is For

Thirty-one seasons. Two thousand five hundred and forty-eight wins against two thousand four hundred and seventy-six losses, which is a winning percentage of .507 and is, in its way, the most honest sentence in this document. Fifteen Octobers. Nine division flags. Eight trips to the conference championship series. Two trips to the final. No trophy.

It would be easy, and it would be wrong, to write this as a tragedy. Tragedy requires that something be lost, and this franchise has not lost anything it ever held. What it has done is arrive, over and over, at the last high ground before the summit, in four different decades of league play, under one general manager who has now sat in the same chair for twenty-six years, in a town small enough that everyone in it can name the roster.

The rams on the slope above Sheridan are not fighting over territory, or food, or survival. They are establishing something that will not stay established, against an opponent who will be back next autumn, in a contest that has no final round. It is not futility. Futility is a word for people who were promised something.

The sound is the point. It carries for miles. Everyone in the valley hears it. And every autumn, when it comes again, they stop what they are doing and look up toward the ridge, because there is always the chance — there has been a chance for thirty-one years — that this is the one that settles it.

The Ledger

Franchise founded: 2001 (charter member, The Big League, as the Golden State Captains)

Relocations: 2010, to Big Horn as the Rams

Home: Rams Fieldhouse, Sheridan, Wyoming — capacity 45,000

Conference: Fire Conference, Ruby Division

All-time regular-season record (2001–2031): 2,548–2,476 (.507)

Postseason appearances: 15 in 31 seasons

League Championships: 0

Championship series appearances: 2 — 2012 (lost to the Denver Dynamite), 2022 (lost to the Denver Dynamite)

Conference championship series appearances: 8 — 2011, 2012, 2013, 2022, 2023, 2025, 2027, 2028

Division titles: 9 — 2003, 2012, 2013, 2023, 2024, 2025, 2027, 2029, 2031

Best season: 2024 (102–60)

Worst season: 2009 (56–106), as Golden State

Most Valuable Players: 4 — Mike Wilson (2003), Bill Raymond (2029, 2030, 2031)

Cy Young Awards: 2 — Nick Williams (2030), Travis Sudduth (2031)

Rookies of the Year: 1 — Joey Ehrenkranz (2012, Fire Conference)

Hall of Famers: 2 — Mike Wilson (inducted 2016), five seasons in Golden State; Shane Markward (2029), two seasons in Wyoming

General managers: Clayton D (2001–2005), Dave F (2005–2006), Matt I (2006), Johnny D (2006–)

Ninety-win seasons: 10 — one as Golden State (2003), nine as Big Horn

Seasons as Golden State: 9 (2001–2009), 2 postseason appearances

Seasons as Big Horn: 22 (2010–2031), 13 postseason appearances

Pillars of the Franchise

Bill Raymond, RF (2027–2031) — The best player the franchise has ever had, and it is not an argument. Most Valuable Player of the Fire Conference in 2029, 2030 and 2031, three years running. A .288 hitter with a hundred and seventy-eight home runs and four hundred and sixteen runs batted in across five seasons, with a Gold Glove in 2029, four Silver Sluggers, and series MVP awards in three separate Octobers. His 2029 — .308, fifty home runs, a hundred and twenty-three driven in, nearly eleven wins above replacement — is the finest single season in club history.

Mike Wilson, 1B (2001–2005) — The first great Captain and the only Hall of Famer to have spent significant time in this uniform. He hit .314 over five seasons in Golden State, won Silver Sluggers in 2002 and 2003, and took the Fire Conference Most Valuable Player award in 2003 on the strength of a .333 season worth better than nine wins. He left after 2005, played more than a decade for six other clubs, and was inducted into the Hall of Fame on the whole of it.

Matt Shelton, SP (2010–2019) — The workhorse of the Wyoming era and the pitcher who bridged its two good teams. Ten seasons, 110–94, a 3.77 earned run average, 1,713 innings and 1,555 strikeouts, most of them thrown for clubs that finished fifth. No Ram has pitched more.

Danny Hess, 1B (2026–2031) — The other half of the modern lineup. A .286 hitter with four hundred and fifty-nine runs batted in over six seasons, back-to-back years above .300 in 2028 and 2029, three Silver Sluggers and a Gold Glove.

Raul Rodriguez, SP (2022–2030) — The ace of the second charge. Nine seasons, 95-59, a 3.33 earned run average, and a 13-1 record in 2029. He started the club's 2022 conference championship run and was still there for the division flags of 2023, 2024 and 2025.

Joey Ehrenkranz, CF (2011–2018) — Fire Conference Rookie of the Year in 2012 and the author of the most remarkable October in franchise history: Most Valuable Player of the wild card series, the divisional series and the conference championship series, all in the same postseason, in his first full year. Seven seasons, a hundred and ninety-five stolen bases, a Gold Glove.

Danny Favila, SP (2001–2005) — The first good arm the franchise ever had. Five seasons, a 2.92 earned run average, and back-to-back 2.42 seasons in 2003 and 2004 that carried Golden State to its only two Octobers.

Josh Ferguson, 3B (2028–2031) — Silver Sluggers in 2028 and 2029, a divisional series MVP in the first of them, and a hundred and nine home runs in four seasons hitting behind Raymond.

Compiled from The Big League franchise records, 2001–2031.