



THE NEW YORK EMPIRE

A Franchise History of The Big League — 2012 to 2031

A province, a capital, a decade of rule, and a collapse nobody saw coming.

In the style of Geoffrey C. Ward

PROLOGUE

The Province and the Capital

Every empire begins somewhere unglamorous. It begins in a province, in a town nobody writes about, among people who are not yet anybody's subjects and do not yet imagine they will rule, and it takes the capital later, and the capital is the part that gets remembered.

This franchise entered The Big League in 2012 as the Syracuse Stealth, a club named for the quality of being unnoticed, and for eight seasons it was exactly that: two Octobers, no flags, a fifth-place finish or a sixth almost every year, and a ballpark upstate where two million people a year came out and went home.

In 2020 it moved downstate and took the name of the thing it was about to become.

What followed is the most concentrated run of winning any club in this league has put together. Nine Octobers in twenty seasons, four division flags, a championship in 2021, two Most Valuable Players, three Cy Young Awards, a hundred and three wins in 2026, and three and a half million people a year coming through the turnstiles. Between 2021 and 2028 the New York Empire won seven hundred and sixty-one games and lost 535.

And then, in 2031, it lost a hundred and one.

That is the whole shape of it. A province, a capital, a decade of rule, and a collapse so fast that the men who watched it happen are still on the roster. In 2026 this club won a hundred and three games. Five years later it was the worst team in the Ice Conference.

Empires do not decline gradually. That is a thing historians made up afterward to make the fall seem reasonable.

I

Syracuse

2012 – 2019

They were an expansion club and they were better at it than most.

Eighty-three wins in the first season, which is more than any of the other three clubs that joined the league that year managed, and then seventy-five, seventy-one, seventy-four. Four consecutive seasons out

of October, which remains the longest drought this franchise has known and is a measure of how little it has ever really suffered.

Josh Van der Werff caught behind the plate and won a Gold Glove in 2014. Noah Green played shortstop. Aaron Phillips made a hundred and four starts in three years and finished thirty-four and thirty-eight, which was about right.

And in the 2011 draft, before the club had played a game, somebody in the Syracuse office spent a third-round pick, sixty-eighth overall, on a left fielder the Milwaukee Mobsters had let go, named Mike Zalucki. He came up in 2013 and played fourteen seasons for this franchise and is, by a distance nobody else is close to, the most valuable player it has ever had.

In 2016 they won eighty-six games and went to October for the first time. Masao Yamamoto won a Silver Slugger, Danny Baker a Gold Glove. In 2017 they won eighty-four and went again. Then eighty-two, then seventy-four, and Fernando Lindgren had taken over the dugout in 2016 and Joe G had taken over the front office the same year, and both of them are still in place fifteen years later.

Zalucki won Silver Sluggers in 2018 and 2019. Aaron Horsfall, on his way to a Hall of Fame plaque he would earn in Denver, played a hundred and fifty-five games in Syracuse and won a Gold Glove in 2019.

Then the club moved to New York.

II

The Name and the Trophy

2020 – 2021

The 2020 New York Empire won eighty games and lost eighty-two and finished fifth, and nothing about it suggested what was a year away.

The 2021 New York Empire won eighty-eight games. That is all. Eighty-eight and seventy-four, third place in the Sapphire Division, into October as a wild card, and the starting pitcher who took the most turns that year, Gavin Sadler, finished nine and seventeen with an earned run average of 4.94.

Mike Zalucki hit .342 with thirty home runs and thirty-one stolen bases and won a Silver Slugger. Rich Rhinehart, the seventh pick of the 2019 draft, hit twenty-three home runs in ninety-nine games in his first real season. Mario Ortiz hit .189 and drove in ninety-seven runs, which is a sentence that should not be possible. Ed Pederson went thirteen and ten.

In October they beat their first opponent, and Rich Rhinehart was named most valuable player of the round. They beat their second, and Zalucki took the honors. They beat their third, and it was Tommy Harris. And in the Big League Championship Series they beat the Virginia Rebels, and the most valuable player of it was Adam Bixby, a pitcher acquired from the Las Vegas organization who had made twenty-nine starts that year and would make fifty more in his life.

Eighty-eight wins. Only one champion in this league's history has won fewer, the 2020 Huron Herons at eighty-four, and the Empire have never come nearer to a second trophy than they did that autumn.

III

The Decade

2022 – 2028

Then the thing became a machine and stopped needing luck.

Ninety-seven wins in 2022, and Gavin Sadler went sixteen and eight and won the Cy Young Award of the Ice Conference — the same man, one year after nine and seventeen. Ninety-six and the division in 2023. Eighty-seven in 2024, when Billy Perez won the Cy Young. Ninety-nine and the division in 2025, when Perez won it again and Travis Eaton was named Most Valuable Player of the Ice Conference.

Eaton had been the twenty-fifth pick of the 2015 draft, taken by the New York Griffins, and had won an MVP for that club in Toronto four years earlier. He came to the Empire in 2025 and hit .295 with two hundred and seven home runs across seven seasons and never played fewer than a hundred and fifty-seven games in any of them.

And then 2026: a hundred and three wins and sixty-two losses, the most this franchise has ever won and among the best seasons anybody in the league has had. Malachi Lott went seventeen and six with a 2.97. B.J. Reyna went twenty and six with a 2.50. Ron Stone hit forty-seven home runs and drove in a hundred and thirteen. Rich Rhinehart hit thirty. John Boucher hit thirty-two in a hundred and twenty-two games. Travis Eaton hit .293 with thirty-seven and a hundred and ten and won a Silver Slugger and a Gold Glove.

Three million five hundred and eighty-eight thousand people came through the gates, the largest crowd this franchise has ever drawn.

Ninety-five wins in 2027. Ninety-six and another division flag in 2028, when Ron Stone — the thirteenth pick of the 2020 draft, who hit .256 for his whole career here and three hundred and twenty-two home runs anyway — was named Most Valuable Player of the Ice Conference.

Four consecutive Octobers, 2025 through 2028. Seven straight winning seasons. Four division titles in six years. And not one championship series in any of them: the 2021 club, the one that won eighty-eight games and had no business there, is still the only Empire team that has played in a final.

IV

The Fall

2029 – 2031

Eighty-six wins in 2029 and fourth place, which nobody thought meant anything.

Seventy-six in 2030, seventh. Nachman Cohen was gone after that year. Malachi Lott's last season here was 2030. Billy Perez's was 2030. Rich Rhinehart's was 2029, and he turned up in Chicago. Gavin Sadler had thrown his last pitch for the club in 2026 and Mike Zalucki his last at-bat in 2027, and Joe Summey, who caught a thousand and forty games in this uniform, was gone after 2023.

And in 2031 the New York Empire won sixty-one games and lost a hundred and one. Chris Kempner went six and sixteen. Josh Austin went five and fifteen. Bryce Mosely hit .161. Armando Cantu hit .188. Travis Eaton, at the end of a career that has produced two thousand and eleven hits, hit .282 with eighteen home runs and was still the best hitter on the roster by a wide margin.

Two million one hundred and twenty-nine thousand people came out, a million and a half fewer than five years before.

It is the worst season in franchise history and it came four years after the best one. There is no explanation in the record that makes it gradual.

V

What an Empire Is

Twenty seasons. One thousand six hundred and ninety-three wins against one thousand five hundred and forty-seven losses, which is .523, and only eight clubs in the league have done better over their own lifetimes.

Nine Octobers. Four division flags, all of them inside six years. One championship, in 2021, over the Virginia Rebels, won by a club that had finished third. Two Most Valuable Players and three Cy Young Awards, all six of them between 2022 and 2028.

No Hall of Famer of its own, which is a strange thing for a club with this record and is mostly a matter of time: Zalucki and Sadler and Lott are only just finished. Four men in the Hall have worn this uniform and none of them stayed: Aaron Horsfall for a hundred and fifty-five games, Jamie Faunce for a hundred and twenty-seven, Steve Moss for forty-six at the very end, and Alex Lopez for thirty-three.

Joe G has run the front office since 2016 and Fernando Lindgren has managed since 2016, and between them they built the province into the capital and then watched it come apart in two winters, and neither of them has been asked to leave.

An empire is not a building. It is an arrangement of people who all happen to be good at the same time, and the arrangement does not know it is temporary, and then one spring the arrangement is sixty-one and a hundred and one and everyone acts surprised.

The Empire will be back. Clubs with this much recent money and this much recent habit usually are. But the run from 2021 to 2028 is finished, and it produced one trophy, and the trophy came in the year nobody expected anything.

The Ledger

Franchise founded: 2012 (expansion), as the Syracuse Stealth

Relocations: New York Empire, 2020

Home: Empire Stadium, New York — capacity 45,000

Conference: Ice Conference, Sapphire Division

All-time regular-season record (2012–2031): 1,693–1,547 (.523)

Postseason appearances: 9 in 20 seasons

League Championships: 1 — 2021 (over the Virginia Rebels)

Championship series appearances: 1 — 2021 (won over the Virginia Rebels)

Division titles: 4 — 2023, 2025, 2026, 2028

Best season: 2026 (103–59)

Worst season: 2031 (61–101)

Most Valuable Players: 2 — Travis Eaton (2025), Ron Stone (2028)

Cy Young Awards: 3 — Gavin Sadler (2022), Billy Perez (2024, 2025)

Rookies of the Year: 0

Hall of Famers: none of its own. Four men in the Hall passed through: Aaron Horsfall for 155 games, Jamie Faunce for 127, Steve Moss for 46 and Alex Lopez for 33

Managers: Jason Schneider (2012–2015), Fernando Lindgren (2016–)

General managers: Tyler B (2012–2015), Joe G (2016–)

Longest postseason drought: 4 seasons (2012–2015)

Consecutive Octobers: 4 (2025–2028)

Best attendance: 3,587,964 (2026)

Pillars of the Franchise

Mike Zalucki, LF (2013–2025, 2027) — The franchise player, and it is not close. Fourteen seasons, 1,762 games, a .284 average, 283 home runs, 923 runs batted in, 409 stolen bases and 1,095 walks, worth 51.1 wins above replacement. Silver Sluggers in 2018, 2019, 2021 and 2022, and most valuable player of the divisional round in the championship October, when he hit .342. A third-round pick, 68th overall in 2011, by the Milwaukee Mobsters.

Malachi Lott, SP (2021–2030) — Ten seasons, 317 starts, 1,894 innings, 125-77, a 3.55 earned run average and 2,102 strikeouts, worth 45.3 wins above replacement, the best arm the club has had. He went 17-6 with a 2.97 on the 103-win team. Second round, 42nd overall, 2016.

Gavin Sadler, SP (2017–2026) — Ten seasons, 312 starts, 1,969 innings, 121-109, a 3.77 earned run average and 1,845 strikeouts, worth 44.7 wins above replacement, more innings than any pitcher in franchise history. Cy Young Award winner of the Ice Conference in 2022, a year after going 9-17 on the championship club, with a Gold Glove in 2023. Third round, 95th overall, 2013.

Travis Eaton, 1B (2025–2031) — Most Valuable Player of the Ice Conference in 2025. Seven seasons, 1,125 games, a .295 average, 207 home runs and 699 runs batted in, worth 37.4 wins above replacement, with Silver Sluggers in 2025, 2026 and 2027 and Gold Gloves in 2025 and 2026. First round, 25th overall, in the 2015 draft, by the New York Griffins, and he had already won an MVP for that franchise in Toronto.

Ron Stone, LF (2023–2031) — Most Valuable Player of the Ice Conference in 2028. Nine seasons, 1,311 games, 322 home runs, 773 runs batted in and 312 stolen bases on a .256 average, with Silver Sluggers in 2027 and 2028 and a Gold Glove in 2025. First round, 13th overall, 2020.

Rich Rhinehart, 3B (2021–2029) — Nine seasons, 1,254 games, 254 home runs and 752 runs batted in, worth 34.0 wins above replacement, with Silver Sluggers in 2024, 2025 and 2026 and the most valuable

player award of the opening round of the 2021 championship run, in his first full season. First round, seventh overall, 2019.

Billy Perez, SP (2023–2030) — Cy Young Award winner of the Ice Conference in 2024 and again in 2025. Eight seasons, 244 starts, 1,569 innings, 106-61 and a 3.22 earned run average, worth 41.6 wins above replacement.

Joe Summey, C (2015–2023) — Nine seasons and 1,040 games behind the plate, 228 home runs and 627 runs batted in on a .213 average, with Gold Gloves in 2019 and 2023. Second round, 63rd overall, 2012.

Gary Giertz, RP (2017–2027) — 663 appearances, more than anyone in club history, with 289 saves and a 3.16 earned run average across eleven seasons, including every one of the club's first six Octobers as a New York club. Third round, 83rd overall, 2013.

B.J. Reyna, SP (2023–2028, 2031) — Seven seasons, 153 starts, 985 innings, 67-45 and a 3.35 earned run average, including a 20-6 season with a 2.50 on the 103-win club of 2026. A seventeenth-round pick, 532nd overall, in 2017.

Masao Yamamoto, 3B (2013–2017) — Five seasons, 717 games, a .284 average and 196 doubles, with a Silver Slugger in 2016 on the first Syracuse club to reach October.

Nachman Cohen, SS (2025–2030) — Six seasons, 802 games, 101 home runs and 117 stolen bases at shortstop through the best years, and most valuable player of the opening round of the 2025 postseason. Third round, 83rd overall, 2021.

Tommy Harris, RF (2017–2022, 2025) — Seven seasons, 710 games and 103 home runs, with a Gold Glove in 2021 and the most valuable player award of the conference championship series that put the club in its only final. Sixth round, 192nd overall, 2013, by the Huron Herons.

Adam Bixby, P (2021–2023) — Most valuable player of the 2021 Big League Championship Series, the single most consequential thing anyone has done in this uniform. Three seasons, 79 starts, 450 innings, 28-27. First round, 30th overall, 2012, by the Las Vegas High Rollers.

Bryce Mosely, RF (2026–2031) — Six seasons, 823 games and 173 home runs on a .224 average, and one of the few everyday men who was there for both the 103-win season and the 61-win one.

Compiled from The Big League franchise records, 2012–2031.