



THE PHOENIX FIREBIRDS

A Franchise History of The Big League — 2001 to 2031

*Two trips to the final in the first four years. None in the twenty-seven since. The bird
still waiting to rise.*

In the style of Geoffrey C. Ward

PROLOGUE

The Bird and the Ash

There is only one reason a city names a baseball team after a firebird, and everybody in Phoenix knows what it is. The bird burns. That is the whole of the story, and it is only half of it. The bird burns, and then the bird comes back, and the coming back is the part that makes the myth worth telling. Ash alone is not a legend. Ash alone is just a fire that went out.

For thirty-one seasons the Phoenix Firebirds have been the most literal franchise in The Big League. They have burned, magnificently, and they have burned often. They opened their existence with the best record in the Ruby Division and went to within one game of a championship in their very first autumn, and they have not been that close since. They have lost a hundred and ten games in a season. They have lost a hundred in another. They have gone twenty-seven years without playing a game in the final round, and they have gone thirty-one years without a trophy, and they have done all of it in front of a city that keeps buying tickets to Firebird Field on the promise printed on the cap.

This is not a sad story, though there is sorrow in it, and it is not a story about failure, though the standings say plenty about that. It is a story about the difference between the burning and the rising, and about a franchise that has proved beyond any argument that it can do the first, and has spent three decades trying to prove it can do the second.

I

The Fire Caught First

2001 – 2002

The Big League opened its doors in the spring of 2001 with thirty-two clubs, thirty-two blank ledgers, and not one line of history among them. Every roster came out of the same pool. Every fan base started at zero. Whatever a franchise was going to be, it was going to have to decide in a hurry, because in that first season nobody had a reputation to lean on and nobody had an excuse.

Phoenix decided fast. They won ninety-four games, the most they have ever won, took the Ruby Division outright, and walked into the first October in league history looking like a club that had been doing this for years.

At the center of it, in right field, stood the first player the franchise ever drafted, tenth overall in the inaugural draft: **Nate Fried**. He hit .311 that first summer with forty-one home runs and a hundred and twenty-one RBI, took a Fire Conference Silver Slugger, and became, on the spot, the face of a baseball team that did not yet have a past. On the mound, **Nelson Rodriguez** went 18–7 with a 3.09 ERA over two hundred and one innings, and behind him **Seth Hauger**, a fifth-round pick from that same first draft, gave the rotation its second serious arm.

The Autumn of 2001

Eighteen games. That is what the first Firebirds postseason came to, and it very nearly came to a championship.

They opened against Oahu and won it four games to two. They took Kingston in five. **Jordan Smith** hit .304 through the run and was named series MVP of the division round; **Randy Scott**, a third baseman in what would be one of only two seasons he ever spent in Phoenix, hit .377 with six home runs in eighteen October games and took the conference-round MVP for himself. Fried hit six home runs and drove in seventeen. **Marty Blessing** hit six more and drove in sixteen. Left-hander **Danny Melendez** went 3–0 out of the bullpen with a 1.04 ERA.

Then came Philadelphia, and the first championship series The Big League ever played, and seven games, and the wrong end of it. Phoenix won three. Philadelphia won four.

They were four months old as a franchise, and they had been one game from the top of the sport. Nobody in the organization believed for a second that this was the closest they would ever get.

The next year they won ninety-one and went back, sweeping St. Louis aside in the opening round before Oahu ended it in seven. Two seasons, two Octobers, one trip to the last series of the year. The fire had caught immediately, and the city settled in for a long warm decade.

II

The Second Fire

2003 – 2005

What Phoenix needed after 2002 was a bat to stand next to Fried, and in August of 2002 they went and got one in a trade that looked, at the time, like a swap of second basemen and nothing more. They sent Jason Hymas to Spokane and received a thirty-one-year-old named **Mark Berry**.

Berry was a Hall of Famer, though nobody could have said so that summer. Over ten seasons in Phoenix he hit three hundred and eight home runs, stole two hundred and twenty-two bases, drew six hundred and thirty-three walks and put up 42.7 wins above replacement, and he did his best work well past the age at which most players are finished. In 2003 he hit forty-five home runs with twenty-eight stolen bases and an 8.2-WAR season. In 2004 he hit forty-one more. At thirty-seven, in 2008, on a club going nowhere, he hit .290 with fifty home runs. He took four Fire Conference Silver Sluggers in Phoenix colors, and he is the only man in the franchise's history to reach the Hall of Fame on the strength of what he did there.

Alongside him Fried kept climbing. In 2004 he hit .284 with forty-seven home runs and a hundred and seventeen RBI, and the writers named him the **Fire Conference Most Valuable Player**, the first MVP the franchise ever produced.

That was the season it all came back. Phoenix went 86–76, fourth in the division, and got in anyway, which turned out to be all they needed. They beat Spokane in five. They swept San Diego, their own division rivals, four games to none, in what remains the most satisfying series in the rivalry. They beat Virginia in seven. And for the second time in four years, the Firebirds played for the championship of The Big League.

New York swept them. Four games, none of them close enough. Hauger was superb through the run, 2–1 with a 1.30 ERA across thirty-four innings, and Berry and Fried hit five home runs apiece over twenty October games, and none of it mattered against the Griffins.

They made it back the following autumn, 87–75, and Virginia swept them out in the opening round, and then the door closed. Nobody could see it closing at the time. Fried was twenty-eight. Berry had six good years left. The club had been to the final round twice and to October four times in five seasons.

It would be twenty-four years before the Phoenix Firebirds won another postseason series.

III

The Long Cooling

2006 – 2013

Decline in baseball rarely announces itself. It shows up as 80–82, which is nothing, and then as 77–85, which is close enough to nothing, and then one morning a franchise looks up and it is 2011 and it has lost a hundred and ten games.

The Firebirds slid gradually and then all at once. They finished 80–82 in 2006 and 77–85 in 2007, a year in which **Justin Pyles** was named Fire Conference Rookie of the Year and **Scott Carestia**, a thirty-three-year-old first baseman acquired from Nashville for a dollar, hit fifty-two home runs with a hundred and thirty-three RBI and took a Silver Slugger. That was the last genuinely exciting summer at Firebird Field for a long while. Carestia would go on to become a Hall of Fame candidate in his own right, and is on the ballot the Veterans Committee will vote on this winter, though the best of his career happened elsewhere.

Fried held on. He was still in the lineup in 2012, his twelfth season, the only man in the building who had been there for the 2001 run, and when he finally walked away he left as the greatest position player the franchise had produced: 1,760 hits, three hundred and ninety-four home runs, 1,117 RBI, a .276 average, all of it in Phoenix, none of it anywhere else. He has never been elected to the Hall of Fame. He came up for the Veterans Committee in 2031 and drew two votes, one short of the three required for election, and under the rules he cannot appear again until 2036. Thirty-one years on, the franchise's founding star is still waiting outside the door.

There was one more brush with greatness in the cooling years. In 2008 Phoenix picked up a thirty-four-year-old right-hander named **Alex Lopez** from New York for essentially nothing, and Lopez, who would eventually be inducted into the Hall of Fame, gave them three of the finest pitching seasons in club history: 16–7 with a 3.06 ERA, then 16–8 at 2.96, then a 5.9-WAR campaign in 2010 in which he went 8–13 because the team behind him could not score. That is the whole of the era in one line. A Hall of Fame arm, pitching as well as anyone in the conference, finishing five games under .500.

The bottom arrived in 2011: 52–110, seventh in the division, the worst season the Firebirds have ever played. **Clark Heine** stole forty-two bases and took a Silver Slugger that year, and **Ian Davis** won a Gold Glove, and those are the only two nice things there are to say about it. The club lost ninety-seven games again in 2012 and 92 in 2013.

Eight straight losing seasons. No October since 2005. A city that had been to the final round twice before its fifth birthday now had a whole generation of children who had never seen a playoff game.

IV

Pat Moore Alone

2014 – 2025

In the second round of the 2010 draft, in the middle of all that losing, Phoenix took a second baseman named **Pat Moore**. He is the best player the franchise has ever developed, he is its all-time leader in hits and in wins above replacement, and he spent almost his entire career on teams that finished under .500.

The numbers are extraordinary and they are worth setting down plainly. Twelve seasons, all of them in Phoenix. 1,637 games. 1,957 hits. three hundred and twenty-one home runs. 1,038 RBI. A .298 batting average. 46.7 WAR. Four Fire Conference Silver Sluggers, in 2018, 2020, 2021 and 2023. In 2018 he hit .340 with two hundred and twenty-two hits, forty-two home runs and a hundred and twenty-four RBI, a 7.9-win season that is the finest year any position player has ever had in a Firebirds uniform.

The Firebirds finished that season 68–94.

That is the shape of the whole era. Moore arrived in 2014, when the club won 66. He was still there in 2024, when it lost 100. In between, Phoenix went 66–96, 66–96, 88–74, 78–85, 68–94, 64–98, 76–86, 73–89, 63–99, 77–85, 62–100. Around him, good players came and went in ones and twos and never in threes: **Ryan Harvey** hitting .309 with thirty-seven home runs in 2016, **Matt Lindquist** stealing three hundred and thirty-one bases across a decade in center field, **Josh Mull** taking Gold Gloves at third base in 2018 and 2019, **Oscar Fuentes** winning one behind the plate in 2014 and **Josh Downey** one in right field in 2017, **Ethan Pauly** giving the rotation seven honest years. It was never enough, and it was never close to enough, and Moore kept showing up and hitting .300.

One October in Twelve Years: 2016

He got one.

In 2016 the Firebirds went 88–74, a twenty-two-game improvement that came out of nowhere and went back to nowhere the following spring. Moore hit .332 with a hundred and ninety-seven hits. Harvey hit .309 with a hundred and eighteen RBI. For one summer the ballpark filled up and the arithmetic worked.

Huron beat them in seven games in the opening round.

That is the entire postseason career of Pat Moore: seven games, one series, one October in twelve seasons of being one of the best players in the conference. When he retired after 2025 he had never won a playoff series. The franchise had not won one since he was in grade school.

V

Relit

2026 – 2030

And then, quietly, without a marquee signing or a blockbuster trade, it started to work.

The 2026 Firebirds went 85–77 and made the postseason for the first time in a decade. **Kaden Allen**, a fourth-round pick from the 2018 draft, hit .284 with thirty home runs and won a Silver Slugger. Oklahoma City knocked them out in five, but the direction had changed, and it kept changing:

Eighty-six wins and an October in 2027. Ninety-two and another in 2028. Eighty-two and another in 2029. Ninety-two and the division in 2030, the first flag since the inaugural season. And seventy-eight and a losing record in 2031 that got into October anyway.

Six straight Octobers, the longest run of contention in franchise history, longer than the opening burst of the 2000s that everyone still talks about.

The Arm They Drafted: Travis Sudduth

The engine of it was a right-hander Phoenix took with its first-round pick in 2022. **Travis Sudduth** reached Firebird Field in 2026 and by the following summer he was the best pitcher in the conference.

In 2027 he went 17–2 with a 2.22 ERA and two hundred and thirty strikeouts in a hundred and ninety-five innings, a 7.7-win season, and took the **Fire Conference Cy Young Award**. In 2028 he won it again, 12–8 with a 2.66 ERA and two hundred and three strikeouts. Over six seasons in Phoenix he went 63–28 with a 2.48 ERA and nine hundred and twenty-one strikeouts, which is, by a wide margin, the best run any pitcher has ever put together for this franchise.

He had help. **Mike Taylor**, acquired from Rochester for a minor-league shortstop, won thirteen games in 2027 and eleven in 2028. **Wally Gullede** and **Kyler Baxley** filled out the rotation. Allen won a Gold Glove in right in 2027 and was series MVP of the wild-card round in 2028. **Brad Battiste** and **Jose Bautista** and **Jose Zavala** turned into a real outfield, and in 2030 Zavala hit .315 with a hundred and ninety-five hits and a 7.2-win season, the best year by a Firebirds position player since Pat Moore's 2018.

In 2029 they finally broke the drought. Phoenix beat Spokane in seven, swept Big Horn four games to none, and reached the semifinal round for the first time since 2004. Sudduth went 3–0 with a 1.99 ERA and thirty-eight strikeouts across thirty-one October innings. Virginia beat them in seven.

In 2030 they won ninety-two games and took the Ruby Division, the first division title the franchise had won since its inaugural season twenty-nine years earlier. They beat Virginia in seven in the opening round. Then Huron swept them out of the quarterfinals, four games to none, and the season ended without a single close game at the end of it.

What They Sold in August (2031)

The 2031 season is the hardest chapter in this history to write, because it is the one where the front office told the truth.

Phoenix was 78–84 and hanging onto a postseason berth in an expanded field. Sudduth, at twenty-eight, was pitching as well as ever, 9–6 with a 2.91 ERA. And on the fourth of August the Firebirds traded him to Big Horn for two minor leaguers, and on the same afternoon they sent Brad Battiste and catcher Miguel Chavez to Denver for one dollar.

They made the playoffs anyway. Oklahoma City swept them, four games to nothing, and that was the year.

What it means depends on which way you read it. A club that sells its two-time Cy Young winner in a season it is going to qualify for October has looked at its roster of thirty-year-olds hitting .230 and decided the window was never really open. That is a defensible reading of a lineup in which the second baseman hit .230, the third baseman hit .225, the right fielder hit .237 and the left fielder the club had built around hit .217. The six-year run was real, and it produced one division title, one semifinal, and no games in the final round.

Thirty-one seasons. Two thousand three hundred eighty-six wins, two thousand six hundred thirty-seven losses. Eleven Octobers. Two trips to the championship series, both of them before the franchise turned five. No trophy.

The bird has burned. Twice, in 2001 and 2004, it very nearly rose. What comes next is a twenty-five-year-old right-hander named Drew Huck, who put up a 2.74 ERA in his first year in Phoenix, and a farm system holding two arms that came back from Big Horn in August, and a city that has been told to wait before.

VII

The Constant

Through all of it, every one of the thirty-one seasons, from the 94-win dawn to the 110-loss summer to the August afternoon they sold the ace, there has been one man running the Phoenix Firebirds: **Brendan Cooke**.

He has never worked anywhere else in this league. He built the club that went to the first championship series ever played and the club that went back in 2004, he sat through the eight-year

collapse and the 52–110 season, he drafted Pat Moore in the second round and Travis Sudduth in the first, he got the franchise back to six straight Octobers in his late fifties, and he made the call to trade Sudduth away.

Thirty-one years is a very long time to keep showing up for a team that has never won anything. It is also, in a league where general managers come and go every few seasons, the single most remarkable fact in this history. Whatever the Firebirds finally become, one man will have built all of it.

The fire is still lit. That much has never been in question in Phoenix.

The Ledger

Franchise founded: 2001 (charter member, The Big League)

Home: Firebird Field, Phoenix, capacity 45,000

Conference: Fire Conference, Ruby Division

All-time regular-season record (2001–2031): 2,386–2,637 (.475)

Postseason appearances: 11 in 31 seasons (last: 2031)

League Championships: none

Championship series appearances: 2 — 2001 (lost to the Philadelphia Eagles), 2004 (lost to the New York Griffins, now Toronto Griffins)

Division titles: 2 (2001, 2030)

Best season: 2001 (94–68)

Worst season: 2011 (52–110)

Most Valuable Players: 1 — Nate Fried (2004, Fire Conference)

Cy Young Awards: 2 — Travis Sudduth (2027, Fire Conference), Travis Sudduth (2028, Fire Conference)

Rookies of the Year: 1 — Justin Pyles (2007, Fire Conference)

Hall of Famers: 1 of its own — Mark Berry (2013), who played 1,315 of his 1,582 games in Phoenix. Nate Fried and Pat Moore, the two greatest Firebirds, are both still outside.

General managers: Brendan Cooke

Pillars of the Franchise

Pat Moore, 2B (2014–2025) — The greatest player the franchise ever developed and its all-time leader in hits (1,957) and WAR (46.7). Four Fire Conference Silver Sluggers, 321 home runs, a .298 career average in Phoenix, and .340 with 222 hits in 2018. One postseason series in twelve seasons.

Nate Fried, RF (2001–2012) — The first player the franchise ever drafted and its founding star, and its all-time leader in games (1,685) and home runs (394). Fire Conference MVP in 2004, three-time Silver Slugger, 394 home runs, 1,760 hits, 1,117 RBI, all of it in Phoenix. Drew two votes on the 2031 Veterans Committee ballot, one short of election, and cannot appear again until 2036.

Mark Berry, 2B (2002–2011) — Hall of Famer, acquired from Spokane in August 2002 for Jason Hymas. Four Fire Conference Silver Sluggers, 308 home runs, 222 stolen bases and 42.7 WAR in Phoenix, including 45 home runs at thirty-two and 50 at thirty-seven.

Travis Sudduth, RHP (2026–2031) — Back-to-back Fire Conference Cy Young Awards in 2027 and 2028; 17–2 with a 2.22 ERA and 230 strikeouts in the first of them. 63–28 with a 2.48 ERA as a Firebird, the best pitching career in club history. Traded to Big Horn at the 2031 deadline.

Alex Lopez, RHP (2008–2010) — Hall of Famer who gave Phoenix three of its best pitching seasons at the wrong end of his career and the wrong end of the standings, including a 5.9-WAR year in 2010 in which he finished 8–13.

Seth Hauger, RHP (2001–2005) — Fifth-round pick from the inaugural draft, workhorse of the two championship-series clubs, 2–1 with a 1.30 ERA through the 2004 postseason.

Kaden Allen, LF/RF (2022–2031) — A fourth-round pick who became the everyday bat of the relit era: 1,143 hits, 211 home runs, a Silver Slugger in 2026, a Gold Glove in 2027, wild-card series MVP in 2028.

The first October: Randy Scott hit .377 with six home runs in the 2001 postseason and was conference-round MVP; Jordan Smith took the division-round MVP in the same run; Marty Blessing drove in sixteen. Eighteen games, one win short of a championship, in the franchise's first year alive.

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