



THE ROCHESTER NORTH STARS

A Franchise History of The Big League — 2012 to 2031

Eleven years at the bottom of the sky. Nine years as the fixed point.

In the style of Geoffrey C. Ward

PROLOGUE

The Fixed Point

Every star in the northern sky is moving except one.

The others wheel through the night in slow arcs, rising and setting, the whole vault of them turning through the dark hours as though the sky itself could not decide where it wanted to be. Only one star holds. Sailors learned this before they learned anything else worth knowing, and they built an entire science on it: that if you can find the one thing that does not move, you can find everything else. Not because the star takes you anywhere. Because it tells you where you are.

For eleven years, this franchise had no such star.

It was born in 2012 in Winston-Salem, one of four expansion clubs brought in to widen a league that had already found its shape without them, and for more than a decade it did not so much play baseball as drift through it. Eight last-place finishes. A summer that ended 45-117. A general manager arrested before the club had thrown a single pitch. Another who resigned by saying out loud what everyone in the league had privately concluded — that the Camels would never matter. They were the thing the standings were measured against. They were the bottom of the sky.

And then, in the winter of 2022, they went north.

What happened next has no clean parallel in The Big League. In nine seasons in Rochester the North Stars have won at least ninety-three games every single year, taken seven division flags, reached October nine times out of nine, and raised three championship banners. The worst franchise the league had ever tolerated became, without any transitional decade, one of the best it has ever produced.

This is the story of a club that spent eleven years with nothing to steer by, and then became the thing other clubs steer by.

I

Born on Sand

2012 – 2015

The Winston-Salem Camels were an expansion team in the way that a building is a lot: technically present, structurally theoretical.

Their first general manager was a man named Lex, who arrived with the vocabulary of innovation and very little else. He drafted without scouting. He missed press conferences. He was arrested on drug charges before Opening Day, and his tenure ended before the franchise had played an inning of baseball. It is a strange thing for a club to acquire a scandal before it acquires a win, but that is the order in which Winston-Salem did it, and the stain set early and deep.

What he left behind went to a man named Brian, who was honest, steady, and entirely realistic about what he had been handed. His first club lost a hundred and one games. His second lost 108. Those were the only two he got.

Brian lasted two seasons and then said the quiet thing. "I just don't think the Camels will ever matter," he told the room on his way out after 2013. He was not being cruel. He was reading the sky honestly, and the sky said nothing.

II

The Long Bottom

2016 – 2022

What followed was the longest, flattest stretch of losing any franchise in The Big League has endured.

A young general manager named Daniel took over in 2014, got the club to 73-89 in his first year behind Dennis Hoy, the franchise's first genuinely good player, and eventually climbed to fifth place in 2017 — a finish so unremarkable anywhere else in the league that in Winston-Salem it registered as an achievement, and remains the only season between 2012 and 2022 in which the club escaped the bottom two. Josh Kidd was the best hitter on those teams, twice over. Scott Hendricks won a Gold Glove in the Ice Conference in 2018. These are the artifacts you collect when there is nothing else to collect.

Daniel did not fail so much as he was noticed. The Huron Herons, a stable club with real ambition, offered him a job, and he took it, and he won a championship there the following season. It is the cruelest sentence in the franchise's early history, and it is true.

Then came 2019: forty-five wins, a hundred and seventeen losses, sixty-one games out of first. There is no useful way to narrate a season like that. The club finished last again in 2020, and again in 2021, and the fan base — which league reports had already classified as poor — largely stopped pretending.

But somewhere in the middle of that dark, two things happened that would matter enormously.

The first was that in 2020, a man named Michael took control of the franchise.

He was not new to The Big League. He had built the Huron Herons from nothing into a power in the league's first decade, on sharp trades and aggressive scouting and a talent for seeing value where other men saw filler. The success had brought envy, and the envy had brought whispers — collusion, some of them said. Nothing was ever proven. The noise was enough. He left the league, and now he was back, at the very bottom of it, holding the only franchise nobody else wanted.

The second was that in 2022, the Camels called up a rookie outfielder named Jeff Bass, who stole bases at a rate the league had no defense for and won Rookie of the Year in the Ice Conference. Winston-Salem finished eighth again, at 75-87. It was the best record the Camels ever posted, and it was their last.

III

North

2023 – 2025

The franchise moved to Rochester before the 2023 season, took the name North Stars, and stopped losing so abruptly that the league spent most of that summer waiting for the correction.

It never came. The 2023 North Stars won ninety-three games, finished second, and reached the postseason for the first time in franchise history — the eleven-year wait ending in a single season, without a transitional year, without a soft landing. Mike Taylor won the Ice Conference Cy Young. John Hodges won a Gold Glove. Jeff Bass, in his second year, went on running.

Then a hundred and two wins in 2024 and the first division flag the franchise had ever held. Then a hundred and nine wins in 2025 — still the best season in club history, and one of the great regular seasons The Big League has recorded.

And they won nothing.

This is the part of the story that gets skipped when people tell it quickly. Rochester's first three years were a 304-win stretch that produced no championship at all. The 2025 club, the best of them, watched Virginia raise the trophy. There is a version of this franchise's history in which those three summers are the whole story — a long-suffering club that finally got good, and found out that getting good is not the same as getting there.

What the Move Actually Was

It is worth being precise about the thing Michael did, because "they relocated and got good" flattens it into luck.

The core he assembled did not arrive at once and did not arrive from anywhere in particular. Bass came up through the Camels' own system in the last year of the losing. Mike Taylor came in a trade. Vince Hernandez came over from the Carolina Reapers in 2029 and hit from the moment he arrived. Roy Bell arrived in 2024 and was, within two years, the best pitcher in the conference. Lyle Egner did not appear until 2026 and never played a professional inning anywhere else.

There was no single stroke. There was a decade of picking in the dark, and then a room that had been assembled the whole time.

IV

The Banner Years

2026 – 2027

The 2026 North Stars were, by record, the weakest good team Rochester has fielded. Ninety-three wins. Second place in the division. They had been better in each of the two previous seasons and had nothing to show for either.

They won the championship, over the Kansas City Scouts, and the man who was named Most Valuable Player of the series was Chris McCloud — a career .241 hitter who had spent parts of three organizations being not quite enough, and who in one October was exactly enough. Roy Bell won the Ice Conference Cy Young. Jeff Bass won his third straight Silver Slugger and took the MVP award of the conference round.

It is the oldest lesson the game teaches and the hardest one for a front office to accept: the best team does not win, the team that is good enough wins, and being good enough for long enough is the only strategy that has ever worked.

Rochester then proved it by doing it again.

The 2027 club won ninety-nine games, took the division, and beat the San Antonio Chiles Picantes, now the Myrtle Beach Mermen, for a second consecutive title. Roy Bell won a second consecutive Cy Young. Lyle Egner won a Gold Glove and a series MVP. Mike Davison — a .207 career hitter who ran and caught the ball and did little else the box score respected — was the Most Valuable Player of the championship series.

Fourteen years after a general manager was arrested before Opening Day, the same franchise was a repeat champion.

The Third Banner and the Long Plateau

2028 – 2031

The four seasons since have been the strangest kind of excellent.

Rochester won a hundred and three games in 2028 and did not win the title; Denver did. They won ninety-eight in 2029 and did win it, beating the Virginia Rebels, with Tim Liddick taking championship series MVP and Vince Hernandez, in his first season in Rochester, winning both a Silver Slugger and a series MVP of his own. They won a hundred and two in 2030 and lost the trophy to Milwaukee. They won a hundred in 2031, with Joey Reek claiming the Ice Conference Cy Young, and watched Denver take it again.

Nine seasons in Rochester. Nine postseason berths. Not one summer under ninety-three wins. Three championships out of nine tries — a rate that would delight any franchise in the league, and which arrives here with a faint and unmistakable ache, because six of those nine best-in-class seasons ended in someone else's celebration.

That is not a complaint the North Stars have any standing to make, and the club has never made it. It is simply the shape of what sustained excellence looks like from the inside. You do not get to convert it. You only get to keep showing up in October, and Rochester has now done that nine years running.

The Constant, and the End of It

Michael ran this franchise from 2020 through 2031 — the last three years of the losing, the move, the rise, and all three banners. He took over a club that had finished last in eight of its first nine seasons and had been called, in print, a team that would never matter. He is the only person who was present for both the 45-117 season and the championship parade.

He came into the league young, built a winner in Huron, and was pushed out of it on suspicion that was never proven. Whatever the league believed about him then, the record he built in Rochester is not ambiguous, and he built it at the one address where nobody could accuse him of inheriting anything.

He has stepped away. The North Stars are, as this is written, searching for the second general manager of the Rochester era, and the first who will be handed something rather than asked to build it.

What the Star Is For

The North Star does not take you anywhere. That is the thing people get wrong about it. It has no power to move a ship an inch. Its entire usefulness is that it stays put while everything else turns, so that a person lost in open dark can look up and learn, at least, where he is.

For eleven years in Winston-Salem this franchise was the thing that other clubs used to locate themselves — the fixed bottom, the known quantity, the floor you measured your own season against. It served that function faithfully and without dignity.

It serves the same function now from the other end of the sky.

Whether it goes on doing so is, for the first time in nine years, an open question. The man who found north for this franchise has gone, and the room he built is still full — Hernandez and Egner still hitting, Reek in the middle of a run, seven straight division flags in the rafters and a ballpark that has forgotten how to expect losing. Someone else will take the chair this winter and inherit the best problem in The Big League: a club with nothing left to prove and everything left to lose.

The star holds because it holds. The moment it moves, it is just another light.

The Ledger

Franchise founded: 2012 (expansion, as the Winston-Salem Camels)

Relocations: 2023, to Rochester as the North Stars

Home: North Star Stadium, Rochester — capacity 45,000

Conference: Ice Conference, Jade Division

Postseason appearances: 9 — every season from 2023 through 2031

League Championships: 3 — 2026 (over Kansas City), 2027 (over San Antonio, now Myrtle Beach), 2029 (over Virginia)

Championship series appearances: 3 — 2026 (won over the Kansas City Scouts), 2027 (won over the San Antonio Chiles Picantes, now Myrtle Beach Mermen), 2029 (won over the Virginia Rebels)

Division titles: 7 — 2024, 2025, 2027, 2028, 2029, 2030, 2031

Best season: 2025 (109-53)

Worst season: 2019 (45-117)

Most Valuable Players: 0

Cy Young Awards: 4 — Mike Taylor (2023, Ice Conference), Roy Bell (2026, Ice Conference), Roy Bell (2027, Ice Conference), Joey Reek (2031, Ice Conference)

Rookies of the Year: 1 — Jeff Bass (2022, Ice Conference)

Hall of Famers: none. No Camel or North Star has yet been inducted; Gary Smith (2017) played 44 games here at the end of his career.

General managers: Lex (2012, dismissed before Opening Day), Brian (2012–2013), Daniel (2014–2019), Michael (2020–2031); position vacant, search underway

Seasons as Winston-Salem: 11 (2012–2022), 0 postseason appearances, last place 8 times

Seasons as Rochester: 9 (2023–2031), 9 postseason appearances, never fewer than 93 wins

Pillars of the Franchise

Jeff Bass, SS (2022–2029) — The bridge between the two halves of the story, and the only man to be both a Camel and a champion. Rookie of the Year in the Ice Conference in 2022, in the last summer before the move, on a club that lost 87 games. In eight seasons with the franchise he played 1,251 games, more than anyone in its history, hitting .262 with 136 home runs and 773 stolen bases, winning three consecutive Silver Sluggers from 2024 through 2026 and the conference series MVP award in the first championship year. He left for Las Vegas after 2029. He was not the best player on the great Rochester teams. He was the one who had been there for the bad ones.

Vince Hernandez, 3B (2029–2031) — Three seasons, and the best three-year stretch of hitting the franchise has seen: .297 with 104 home runs and 283 runs batted in across 424 games, with Silver Sluggers in all three years and a series MVP award on the 2029 championship run. He arrived from the Carolina Reapers, now the Chicago Black Sox, the winter before that title and has been the middle of the order since.

Roy Bell, SP (2024–2029) — The ace of both banner clubs. Back-to-back Ice Conference Cy Young Awards in 2026 and 2027, the two championship seasons, in that exact order. In six Rochester seasons he went 72-29 with a 2.64 earned run average and 1,126 strikeouts before leaving for Baltimore after 2029.

Lyle Egner, LF (2026–2031) — Homegrown, and the finest defensive outfielder of the dynasty. A .289 hitter with 126 home runs who won Gold Gloves in 2027 and 2031 and series MVP honors in both the 2027 and 2029 title runs. He has never played for another organization.

Mike Taylor, SP (2022–2026) — Won the Ice Conference Cy Young in 2023, the first winning season the franchise ever had. He went 61-35 with a 2.99 earned run average in five seasons here before moving on to Phoenix. The pitcher who made the first October possible.

Joey Reek, SP (2029–2031) — The next one. A 2.49 earned run average through his first three seasons and the 2031 Ice Conference Cy Young, arriving just as Bell's peak closed.

Tim Liddick, C (2029–2031) — Arrived from Kansas City mid-2029 and was named Most Valuable Player of the championship series that October. A Silver Slugger in both 2030 and 2031.

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