



THE SAN JUAN STOGIES

A Franchise History of The Big League — 2001 to 2031

Three names, two cities, one man. And a title won from third place.

In the style of Geoffrey C. Ward

PROLOGUE

The Falls

For a thousand miles the Ohio runs easy, and then at Louisville it drops twenty-six feet over two miles of limestone, and for most of the river's history that was the end of the trip. Everything that came downstream had to stop there. Cargo came off, went around by land, went back on. The town grew up around the interruption. It was never a destination. It was the place where things paused on the way to somewhere else.

That is this franchise, precisely, for twenty-seven years.

Seventeen trips to October. Seventy-odd men who were good here for three or four seasons and then went on down the river. Two names in Kentucky and a third in the Caribbean. One championship, won in a year nobody expected it, by a club that finished third.

And one man who never went anywhere.

I

Four Years at the Bottom

2001 – 2004

The Louisville Rivermen were a charter member of The Big League and they opened with an 81-81 season that flattered them badly. The next year they lost a hundred and five games, which is still the worst season in franchise history and one of the worst anyone played in the league's first decade. Sixty-three wins in 2003. Seventy-one in 2004. Attendance fell to a million and a half, a figure this club has never approached since.

Miles D ran the franchise through those four summers. There was a Gold Glove for Mike Appelgate in 2002 and two for David Walter, and not much else.

But in 2004 the Rivermen brought up a twenty-two-year-old third baseman named Sung-hyun Park, who hit .246 with twenty-three home runs and was worth five wins in his first season and was named Rookie of the Year of the Fire Conference. Nothing about the roster in 2004 suggested what was coming. Park did, if you knew how to read it.

Chuck M took over as general manager in 2005 and has held the job ever since. Twenty-seven seasons, three franchise names, one chair.

II

The Year It Happened

2005 – 2007

In 2005 Louisville won ninety games, took a wild card, and beat somebody in October for the first time — **Jesse Davies** taking the round's honors and a Gold Glove with it — before going out in the next series. Sung-hyun Park hit .290 and took the first of the eight Silver Sluggers he would win in this uniform. After four years at the bottom it looked like a beginning, and for once it was one.

The Third-Place Champions: 2006

The 2006 Louisville Rivermen won ninety-one games and finished third in their division.

They were not the best team in the conference and they were not close to it. They took the last wild card into a four-round tournament and they did not lose a series. Dan Davis was named the most valuable player of the first round. Jesse Davies took the second. Danny Marshburn, a left fielder who hit .219 for his career here and two hundred and thirty-eight home runs, took the conference championship series. And in the Big League Championship Series against the Galveston Gremlins, the most valuable player was Sung-hyun Park, who was twenty-four years old and in his third season and had hit .300 with thirty-seven home runs and a hundred and twenty-eight runs scored.

It remains the only trophy this franchise has won, and it was won from third place by a club that had lost a hundred and five games four years earlier.

In 2007 they won ninety-one again and Park hit .322 with thirty-seven home runs and a hundred and four runs batted in and was named Most Valuable Player of the Fire Conference. They lost in October. It became the pattern.

They won ninety-one again in 2007 and finished third again, and this time October ended in the first series. It was the season Park was named Most Valuable Player of the Fire Conference, the only man in franchise history to win it, on a club that had been champions twelve months earlier and could not get out of the opening round. Nobody in Louisville thought much of it at the time. There would be plenty more Octobers.

III

Park's Decade

2008 – 2015

From 2009 through 2015 the Rivermen went to October seven straight years, which is the longest such run in franchise history and one that produced, in the end, nothing.

Eighty-seven wins in 2009. Ninety-nine in 2010. A hundred and two in 2011, the best season this club has ever played and the only division title in thirty-one years of trying. Ninety-eight in 2012. Eighty-three in 2013, eighty-nine in 2014, ninety-two in 2015. Seven postseason berths, one round won, in 2012, with Chris Ruuska taking the honors.

Park was the constant. He won a Silver Slugger in every season from 2005 through 2012, eight in a row. In 2011 he hit .299 with thirty-four home runs and forty-seven stolen bases and was worth better than eight wins. In 2012, at thirty, he hit .274 with twenty-nine home runs, a hundred and two runs batted in and forty stolen bases and won his second conference Most Valuable Player award.

Around him the river moved. Chris Ruuska came up in 2010 and was named Rookie of the Year and stayed eleven years and hit two hundred and sixty-five home runs. Dave Burke, a tenth-round pick, two hundred and sixty-ninth overall, made two hundred and seventy-nine starts. Steve McKenzie played three brilliant seasons at shortstop and left. Kevin Loudermilk gave eight years in center. Danny Marshburn won three Gold Gloves and went to San Diego.

And in 2015 Omari Burns, who had spent seven mostly ordinary seasons in this rotation, went 19-6 with an earned run average of 2.63 and won the Cy Young Award of the Fire Conference. Louisville won ninety-two games and lost in the first round.

IV

Two More Names

2016 – 2027

Park's last good season was 2016. He played through 2018 and retired with two thousand two hundred and nine games, every one of them in this uniform, and went into the Hall of Fame in 2021.

The club that survived him was harder to describe. Eighty-three wins in 2016 and seventy-two in 2017, the first losing season in thirteen years, with **Francisco Contreras** winning Gold Gloves in center in both. Then ninety-two wins and a wild card in 2018, on the strength of Christian Webb's October and Chris Ruuska's best season and a Silver Slugger for Ruuska. Then seventy-eight, and seventy-eight again, and eighty-nine and an October in 2021, with Nick Tabor and Tomas Chavolla taking Gold Gloves.

In 2022 the franchise changed its name to the Louisville Thoroughbreds and lost a hundred games.

That is the whole of what can be said about 2022. Sixty-two and a hundred, eighth place, the worst finish in nineteen years, in the first season under a new name in the same city.

Jared Fleshman and Chavolla won Gold Gloves inside that hundred-loss season, which tells you exactly what the club could and could not do.

They came back the next year at 85-77 and went to October. Eighty-one and eighty-one in 2024. Eighty-six and another berth in 2025. Seventy-four in 2026. And ninety-one wins and second place in 2027, the last season this franchise would ever play in Kentucky. Andy Nerys, Zhong-yi Snyder, T.J. Morgan, Kyle Adams and Jonathan Mendoza took Gold Gloves across those five summers, which is the signature of the whole era: a club that caught everything and could not score. Scott Cassell played shortstop for nine seasons. Zhong-yi Snyder hit a hundred and eighty-three home runs and stole three hundred bases across eleven summers and never hit .250. Ed Pohl, an eighth-round pick, two hundred and forty-third overall, came out of the bullpen seven hundred and ten times and saved three hundred and fifty-five games with an earned run average of 2.53, which is more appearances than anyone in franchise history and more saves by a distance.

After the 2027 season the club left Kentucky for Puerto Rico.

V

San Juan

2028 – 2031

The Stogies won eighty-eight games in their first season on the island and went to October, and won eighty in the second and went again, and then the bottom came out. Sixty-seven wins in 2030 and seventy-four in 2031, sixth place both years.

There was one thing worth the trip. Ryan Wallace, the sixth pick of the 2023 draft, went 13-4 in 2029 with an earned run average of 1.66 and won the Cy Young Award of the Fire Conference. It is the finest

season any pitcher has thrown for this franchise, and it came on an 80-82 club that squeaked into October and went out immediately.

Jonathan Mendoza, a tenth-round pick, three hundred and fourth overall, has made a hundred and seventy-seven starts since 2025. Scott Moore won a Silver Slugger at third in 2029. T.J. Morgan and Travis Williams and Nate Cronin and Mike Sims won Gold Gloves in four consecutive years, which tells you what kind of club this has become: well-caught, well-fielded, and short of bats.

Chuck M is still in the chair.

VI

One Man

Thirty-one seasons. Two thousand five hundred and fifty-nine wins and two thousand four hundred and sixty-five losses, which is .509 and about as middling as a number can be. Seventeen Octobers, which is a great many. One division title in three decades, which is almost none. One championship, won from third place in a year when the club was not among the best teams in its own conference.

Three names. Two cities. One general manager since 2005.

And Sung-hyun Park, who played fifteen seasons and two thousand two hundred and nine games and never once put on another club's uniform, who won eight Silver Sluggers and two conference Most Valuable Player awards and a Gold Glove and the most valuable player award of the only Big League Championship Series this franchise has ever appeared in, and who is the only man with a plaque in the Hall of Fame that belongs to this club and no other.

Everything else went on downriver. He stayed at the falls.

The Ledger

Franchise founded: 2001 (charter member, The Big League, as the Louisville Rivermen)

Relocations: 2022, Louisville Rivermen to Louisville Thoroughbreds

Home: The Humidor, San Juan — capacity 45,000

Conference: Fire Conference, Topaz Division

All-time regular-season record (2001–2031): 2,559–2,465 (.509)

Postseason appearances: 17 in 31 seasons

League Championships: 1 — 2006 (over Galveston)

Championship series appearances: 1 — 2006 (won over the Galveston Gremlins)

Division titles: 1 — 2011

Best season: 2011 (102–60)

Worst season: 2002 (57–105)

Most Valuable Players: 2 — Sung-hyun Park (2007, 2012)

Cy Young Awards: 2 — Omari Burns (2015), Ryan Wallace (2029)

Rookies of the Year: 2 — Sung-hyun Park (2004, Fire Conference), Chris Ruuska (2010, Fire Conference)

Hall of Famers: 1 of its own, Sung-hyun Park (inducted 2021), who played all 2,209 of his games here. Two others passed through briefly: Shane Markward, 59 games, and Alex Lopez, 36

General managers: Miles D (2001–2004), Chuck M (2005–)

Hundred-win seasons: 1 — 2011

Longest postseason drought: 4 seasons (2001–2004)

Consecutive Octobers: 7 (2009–2015)

Best attendance: 3,472,797 (2027)

Pillars of the Franchise

Sung-hyun Park, 3B (2004–2018) — The franchise. Fifteen seasons, 2,209 games, every one of them in this uniform, a .279 average, 2,332 hits, 362 home runs, 1,176 runs batted in and 323 stolen bases. Rookie of the Year of the Fire Conference in 2004, Most Valuable Player of the conference in 2007 and 2012, eight consecutive Silver Sluggers from 2005 through 2012, a Gold Glove in 2015, and the most valuable player of the 2006 Big League Championship Series. Elected to the Hall of Fame in 2021.

Chris Ruuska, 1B (2010–2020) — Rookie of the Year of the Fire Conference in 2010 and the club's best hitter for a decade after Park's peak. Eleven seasons, 1,681 games, a .272 average, 265 home runs and 944 runs batted in, a Silver Slugger in 2018, and the most valuable player of a 2012 postseason round.

Dave Burke, SP (2005–2015) — Eleven seasons and 279 starts, 1,832 innings, 111–98, a 3.71 earned run average. He started for the 2006 champion and for every good Rivermen club through 2015. A tenth-round pick, 269th overall, in 2001.

Ed Pohl, RP (2017–2028) — Twelve seasons, 710 appearances and 355 saves with a 2.53 earned run average. More games pitched than anyone in franchise history. An eighth-round pick, 243rd overall, in 2014.

Omari Burns, SP (2008–2019) — Cy Young Award winner of the Fire Conference in 2015 at 19-6 with a 2.63 earned run average, in the middle of twelve seasons that were otherwise unremarkable. 248 starts here, 105-75, a 3.84 earned run average.

Danny Marshburn, LF (2005–2012) — Most valuable player of the 2006 conference championship series, the round that put Louisville in the final. Eight seasons, 1,121 games, 238 home runs, 666 runs batted in and three Gold Gloves, on a .219 average that tells you exactly what he was and was not. First round, 20th overall, 2003.

Jesse Davies, RF (2002–2009) — Eight seasons, 928 games, a Gold Glove in 2005, and the most valuable player award in postseason rounds in both 2005 and 2006.

Scott Cassell, SS (2019–2027) — Nine seasons at shortstop, 1,312 games, 157 home runs and 592 runs batted in through the club's two name changes.

Zhong-yi Snyder, LF (2020–2030) — Eleven seasons, 1,334 games, 183 home runs and 303 stolen bases, and a Gold Glove in 2024, on a .235 average. A second-round pick, 51st overall, in 2014.

Eric Pierce, SP (2003–2013) — Eleven seasons, 191 starts, 91-72, a 3.85 earned run average, and the rotation's steadiest arm through the championship years. First round, 15th overall, 2002.

Ryan Wallace, SP (2024–2031) — Sixth overall in 2023, and the author of the best pitching season in franchise history: 13-4 with a 1.66 earned run average in 2029, and the Cy Young Award of the Fire Conference.

Jonathan Mendoza, SP (2025–2031) — A tenth-round pick, 304th overall, who has made 177 starts in San Juan and Louisville, going 64-46 with a 3.52 earned run average, and won a Gold Glove in 2027.

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