



THE SOUTHLAND MASKED BANDITS

A Franchise History of The Big League — 2001 to 2031

A thousand home runs from two men, and not one division flag.

In the style of Geoffrey C. Ward

PROLOGUE

Steam

Steam is the most visible form of power there is. You can see it, which is more than can be said for electricity or gravity or a well-run baseball organization. It comes off the stack in a white column that you can spot from three miles across flat country, and it makes a noise, and it is hot enough to kill a man standing too close.

It is also, at the moment you can see it, doing no work whatsoever. Steam that is turning a wheel is inside the cylinder where nobody can see it. Steam in the air is the part that got away.

For thirty-one seasons this franchise played in St. Louis and called itself the Steam, and in those thirty-one seasons two men hit one thousand and thirty-five home runs in its uniform. Frank Danczyk hit five hundred and fifty-three of them and is in the Hall of Fame. James Dominey hit four hundred and eighty-two and won a Most Valuable Player award. Between them they gave this club thirty-three seasons of the kind of hitting that decides pennants somewhere else.

The Steam never won a division title. Not one, in thirty-one years. They never reached a conference championship series. They went to October eight times and won four opening rounds and lost every other series they ever played.

In the winter after 2031 the name came off the building, and the club that had been the St. Louis Steam since the first pitch the league ever threw became the Southland Masked Bandits.

This is the story of everything that got away.

I

Danczyk

2001 – 2008

The Steam opened at 82-80 and then, in 2002, won eighty-nine games and went to October for the first time, and lost. In 2003 they won eighty-five and went again, and lost. Three and a half million people came out in 2002 and again in 2003, the two biggest gates in franchise history.

Frank Danczyk was already the best player in the building and would remain so for fifteen years. He hit forty-six home runs in the league's first season and drove in a hundred and twenty-two. In 2002 he hit .

330 with forty-four. In 2003, fifty home runs. In 2006, forty-seven. In 2007, .327 with forty-seven home runs and a hundred and thirty-five runs batted in, in only a hundred and twenty games.

He won a Silver Slugger in the first seven seasons the league played, and two more after that, nine in all. He never won a Most Valuable Player award.

Around him the club was ordinary and then briefly better than that. Jessie Wilkes, a third-round pick, fifty-seventh overall, in the first draft, made two hundred and sixty-five starts and went 115-78 with an earned run average of 3.32 and won a Gold Glove. Steve Anderson and Ruben Nunez hit. Juan Benavidez saved two hundred and thirty games out of the bullpen with a 2.87 earned run average, and Alejandro Marquez saved two hundred and forty-four more across twelve seasons.

And in 2008 the Steam won ninety-four games, which is still the most they have ever won, and Corey Kimball went 19-11 with an earned run average of 2.77 and two hundred and fifty-nine strikeouts and won the Cy Young Award of the Fire Conference. St. Louis finished second in the division, went to October, and lost.

That was the high-water mark. Nothing this franchise has done since has come closer.

II

The Long Middle

2009 – 2015

Seven consecutive seasons without an October, the longest drought in franchise history. Seventy-six wins, then eighty-three, then seventy, then sixty-four, then sixty-four again, then seventy-three, then seventy-two.

George K had been running the club since 2001 and would run it until 2021, twenty-one seasons, and this was the stretch that defines the tenure whether it is fair or not.

Danczyk kept hitting. Thirty-nine home runs in 2011 at thirty-something, thirty-eight in 2012, and then the fall came fast: nineteen in 2013, twenty-two in 2014, and by 2016 he was hitting .206 in forty-eight games and it was over. He finished with two thousand two hundred and sixty-six games, every single one of them for this club, five hundred and fifty-three home runs, one thousand five hundred and sixty-two runs batted in, and a plaque in the Hall of Fame that came in 2019.

Landon Trice, a fourth-round pick, hundredth overall, threw two thousand three hundred and thirteen innings in this uniform between 2007 and 2019, more than any pitcher the franchise has had, and finished

142-129. Ivan Zamora hit .284 for eight years at second base. Carlos Castro played thirteen seasons in left field and stole four hundred and twenty-nine bases.

And in 2013 the club used the first overall pick in the draft on a third baseman named James Dominey.

III

Dominey

2016 – 2027

Nate McCarthy came up in 2016, hit .270 with thirty-one home runs, was named Rookie of the Year of the Fire Conference, and in October took the most valuable player award of the opening round. The Steam won eighty-three games, finished third, and lost the next series.

That is the entire shape of what followed. The club got very good bats and did nothing with them.

McCarthy won Silver Sluggers in 2016, 2017, 2018 and 2019 and a Gold Glove in 2021, and finished with three hundred and twenty-nine home runs and five hundred and thirty-six stolen bases in this uniform, which is a combination almost nobody manages.

Dominey took longer. He hit .194 in his first fifty-six games and .249 in his next fifty-seven, and then in 2016 he hit thirty-one home runs, and in 2019 forty-one, and in 2020 he hit .310 with forty-nine home runs, a hundred and twenty-three runs batted in and a hundred and seventeen runs scored, was worth better than ten wins by himself, and was named Most Valuable Player of the Fire Conference.

The 2020 St. Louis Steam won seventy-four games and finished seventh.

That sentence is the franchise. The best individual season anybody has ever had in this uniform, and one of the best anybody has had in this league, produced a seventh-place club.

They got to October in 2022 at ninety-four wins, second place, and Mike Stewart took the opening round and they lost the next. They got there in 2023 and Galtero Capellari took the opening round and they lost the next. They got there in 2025 at eighty-nine wins and Tomas Tapia took the opening round and they lost the next. Three postseason appearances in four years, three opening rounds won, three divisional rounds lost, and never once a game played for a conference championship.

Dominey hit forty-seven home runs in 2022, thirty-six in 2025, thirty-two in 2026 and thirty-nine in 2027, and won eight Silver Sluggers in all. He is not in the Hall of Fame. He is still playing.

IV

The Name Comes Off

2028 – 2031

Seventy-eight wins in 2028. Sixty in 2029, which is a hundred and two losses and the worst season in franchise history. Sixty again in 2030. Sixty-three in 2031, eighth place.

Attendance fell to two million two hundred thousand, near the lowest the club has drawn. Anthony Sexton took the general manager's chair in 2028, the fifth man in seven years to hold it after George K's twenty-one. Dominey played his last games here in 2030 and left for Oahu.

And then, in the winter, the franchise changed its name and its identity, and the thirty-one seasons of the St. Louis Steam closed with a sixty-three-win eighth-place club and no flag of any kind in the building.

V

What Got Away

Two thousand three hundred and sixty-eight wins against two thousand six hundred and fifty-seven losses, a winning percentage of .471. Eight Octobers in thirty-one seasons. Four postseason rounds won, all of them the first one. Zero division titles. Zero conference championship series. Zero finals.

Two clubs in The Big League have played all thirty-one seasons and never once finished first in a division. This is one of them; the other is the club that has been the Boston Boom, the Carolina Reapers and now the Chicago Black Sox.

And the bats. Danczyk's five hundred and fifty-three home runs, Dominey's four hundred and eighty-two, McCarthy's three hundred and twenty-nine, and a Cy Young Award, and a Most Valuable Player award, and a Hall of Famer who played every inning of his career here and never once got to play in a conference championship series.

That is the thing about steam. There was never any question that the power was real. Anybody standing in that ballpark on a night when Frank Danczyk hit two, or the summer James Dominey hit forty-nine, could see it perfectly well from three miles off. It just never turned the wheel.

The Masked Bandits start in 2032 with a new name, a new city and the same ledger. It is a long way from first.

The Ledger

Franchise founded: 2001 (charter member, The Big League, as the St. Louis Steam)

Relocations: 2032, the St. Louis Steam to the Southland Masked Bandits. Every season in this history was played as the Steam

Home: Southland Stadium — capacity 45,000

Conference: Fire Conference, Topaz Division

All-time regular-season record (2001–2031): 2,368–2,657 (.471)

Postseason appearances: 8 in 31 seasons

League Championships: 0

Championship series appearances: 0 — the club has never reached a conference championship series either

Division titles: 0

Best season: 2008 (94–69)

Worst season: 2029 (60–102)

Most Valuable Players: 1 — James Dominey (2020)

Cy Young Awards: 1 — Corey Kimball (2008)

Rookies of the Year: 1 — Nate McCarthy (2016, Fire Conference)

Hall of Famers: 1 of its own, Frank Danczyk (inducted 2019), who played all 2,266 games of his career here and never played a postseason series past the first round

General managers: George K (2001–2021), Kevin S (2022), Nate E (2023), Barry H (2024), Aaron S (2025–2027), Anthony Sexton (2028–)

Postseason rounds won: 4 — 2016, 2022, 2023, 2025, every one of them the opening round

Longest postseason drought: 7 seasons (2009–2015)

Consecutive Octobers: 2 (2002–2003, and again 2022–2023)

Best attendance: 3,439,979 (2002)

Pillars of the Franchise

Frank Danczyk, RF (2001–2016) — The franchise. Sixteen seasons and 2,266 games, every one of them here, a .280 average, 2,288 hits, 553 home runs and 1,562 runs batted in, with nine Silver Sluggers. He hit 46 home runs in the league's first season, 50 in 2003, and .327 with 47 and 135 runs batted in across 120 games in 2007. Elected to the Hall of Fame in 2019. He never won a Most Valuable Player award and never played past an opening round.

James Dominey, 3B (2014–2030) — The first overall pick of the 2013 draft. Seventeen seasons, 1,979 games, a .252 average, 482 home runs, 1,302 runs batted in and 199 stolen bases, with eight Silver Sluggers. Most Valuable Player of the Fire Conference in 2020, when he hit .310 with 49 home runs and 123 runs batted in for a club that finished seventh.

Nate McCarthy, LF (2015–2025) — Rookie of the Year of the Fire Conference in 2016 and the most valuable player of that October's opening round. Eleven seasons, 1,347 games, a .271 average, 329 home runs and 536 stolen bases, with four Silver Sluggers and a Gold Glove. Fourth overall in the 2014 draft.

Landon Trice, SP (2007–2019) — More innings than any pitcher in franchise history: 2,313 across thirteen seasons and 356 starts, 142-129 with a 4.14 earned run average, and a Gold Glove in 2014. A fourth-round pick, 100th overall, who never pitched for another club.

Jessie Wilkes, SP (2002–2009) — 265 starts, 1,730 innings, 115-78 and a 3.32 earned run average, the best sustained pitching this franchise has had. A third-round pick, 57th overall, with a Gold Glove in 2005. He comes before the Hall of Fame Veterans Committee in 2032.

Corey Kimball, SP (2006–2010) — Cy Young Award winner of the Fire Conference in 2008 at 19-11 with a 2.77 earned run average and 259 strikeouts, on the 94-win club that is still the best in franchise history. Five seasons here, 69-42, a 3.38 earned run average. First round, 17th overall, 2004.

Carlos Castro, LF (2005–2017) — Thirteen seasons, 1,457 games, a .279 average and 429 stolen bases, more than any man in franchise history.

Ivan Zamora, 2B (2009–2016) — Eight seasons, 1,133 games, 1,220 hits and a .284 average through the worst stretch the club has had.

Matt Brooks, 1B (2001–2012) — Twelve seasons, 1,184 games and a .285 average, the everyday first baseman of the club's first decade.

Alejandro Marquez, RP (2001–2012) — 665 appearances and 244 saves with a 3.19 earned run average across twelve seasons, more games pitched than anyone in franchise history.

Juan Benavidez, RP (2001–2007) — 398 appearances, 230 saves and a 2.87 earned run average, the back of the bullpen for the two early postseason clubs.

Bill Willis, RF (2012–2020) — Nine seasons, 1,256 games, 590 runs batted in and 163 stolen bases.

Craig Seamans, 3B (2005–2014) — Ten seasons, 1,084 games, a .282 average and 173 stolen bases, the third baseman before Dominey.

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