



THE TORONTO GRIFFINS

A Franchise History of The Big League — 2001 to 2031

Two crowns, two collapses, nine Hall of Famers. A creature of two natures.

In the style of Geoffrey C. Ward

PROLOGUE

A Creature of Two Natures

The griffin has the head and wings of an eagle and the body and hindquarters of a lion, and the old bestiaries could never quite agree on what that made it. Some called it the noblest animal alive, king of the birds and king of the beasts at once. Others thought it a monster, precisely because it was two things that were never meant to be one, and could not be counted on to behave as either.

No club in The Big League has been two things so completely.

The Griffins have won a hundred and one games in a season and they have lost a hundred and twelve. They have won two championships, more than any club in the Sapphire Division, and they have finished last in it five times. They won ninety games in 2006 and fifty in 2007, a forty-game collapse across a single winter, the third-steepest one-year fall anybody in this league has taken. They won ninety-eight in 2010 and ninety-four in 2011 and fifty-three in 2014. They won a hundred games in 2021 and fifty-five in 2025.

Twelve Octobers in thirty-one seasons. Six division flags. Two trophies. Seven Most Valuable Players and three Cy Young Awards, and a Hall of Fame room with more men in it than any other club in the division can claim.

And an all-time record of 2,444 and 2,579, which is a losing record, because every one of those magnificent years has an answering catastrophe attached to it.

They were the New York Griffins for nineteen seasons and they have been the Toronto Griffins for twelve. The city changed. The nature did not.

I

New York

2001 – 2006

They were very good almost at once and stayed that way for six years.

Ninety-eight wins in 2001 and a wild card, and Gary Smith — the twenty-second player taken in the club's first draft, a right fielder who would play thirteen seasons here and is the greatest Griffin there has been — hit his way to a Silver Slugger, a Gold Glove and the most valuable player award of the opening

round. Enrique Munoz played first base and won a Silver Slugger of his own. Ninety-eight again in 2002, and Todd Graham was named Rookie of the Year of the Ice Conference. Ninety-two and a third straight October in 2003.

And then 2004: a hundred and one wins and sixty-one losses, the most this franchise has ever won, and the first flag.

Alex Lopez went twenty and nine. Jose Rosario went fourteen and five with a 2.73. Enrique Munoz hit thirty-four home runs and Chris Robertson thirty-three and Gary Smith twenty-four, and Smith and Robertson both won Silver Sluggers. In October, Omar Torres was named most valuable player of the divisional round and Munoz of the conference championship series, and in the 2004 Big League Championship Series the New York Griffins beat the Phoenix Firebirds, and the most valuable player was Phil Friedman, a left fielder who had hit .294 in a hundred and thirty-one games and has not been much heard from since.

Eighty-one and eighty-one in 2005. Then ninety wins and another division flag in 2006, and Gary Smith won a third Silver Slugger, and three and a half million people came out, and everything looked permanent.

II

Fifty and a Hundred Twelve

2007 – 2009

The 2007 New York Griffins won fifty games and lost a hundred and twelve.

They had won ninety the year before. It is a forty-game swing across one winter and it remains the worst season in franchise history. Ricardo Anguiano won a Gold Glove in the middle of it, which is the only pleasant sentence available. In 2008 they won fifty-two. Attendance fell by a million and a quarter in two years.

There is no tidy account of what happened. The roster turned over, the arms that had carried 2004 were finished or gone, and the club that had been in October three years out of six was suddenly the worst thing in the conference.

By 2009 it had already started coming back. Chad Keyes arrived and was named Most Valuable Player of the Ice Conference, on a seventy-win club, which tells you something about how quickly the talent reassembled and how little the standings had caught up. Ryan Roach, the first overall pick of the 2008 draft, came up the same year.

III

The Second Trophy

2010 – 2012

The 2010 New York Griffins won ninety-eight games and the division, one year after winning seventy.

Willie Fonseca went nineteen and five with a 2.55. Chad Keyes hit thirty-five home runs and drove in a hundred and one. Ryan Roach hit twenty-two and stole forty-two and won a Silver Slugger and a Gold Glove. Kareem Amos hit .292 and won a Gold Glove of his own. Aaron Phillips made thirty-three starts.

In October, Ryan Thompson was most valuable player of the divisional round, and Chad Keyes of the conference championship series, and then Chad Keyes again in the 2010 Big League Championship Series, which the New York Griffins won over the San Diego Seals.

Two trophies in seven seasons. In 2011 they won ninety-four and another flag, and Roach won a second Silver Slugger and a second Gold Glove, and Gary Smith, now in his eleventh season, won one too. In 2012 Roach was named Most Valuable Player of the Ice Conference and the club finished sixth at seventy-seven and eighty-five.

Then Roach left for Somerville, where he would spend the bulk of a Hall of Fame career, and the second collapse began.

IV

The Bottom

2013 – 2017

Seventy-eight wins in 2013. Fifty-three in 2014. Sixty-four. Fifty-one in 2016. Fifty-five in 2017.

Six consecutive seasons out of October, from 2012 through 2017, four of them under sixty-five wins and three of them in last place. Gary Smith played his last game in 2013, after thirteen seasons, two thousand one hundred and forty-four hits and sixty-four wins above replacement, all of it for this one franchise. Alex Lopez, who had come back for a final season in 2013 after five years away, was finished too.

A griffin is an animal assembled out of two others, and the difficulty with that arrangement is that nothing obliges the halves to arrive together. What Toronto had between 2013 and 2017 was neither the

eagle nor the lion. It was a roster of men who were not good enough, watched by a city that had seen a ninety-eight-win team three years earlier and would see a hundred-win team four years later, and had no way at all of knowing the second thing from where it was sitting.

Mike Martin played five hundred and fifty-one games at shortstop and hit .170. Jimmy Adamcik went twenty-one and forty-seven in four seasons. Lee Baker went twenty-five and fifty-one. The front office changed hands three times in eighteen months in 2012 and 2013 before Thayne B settled into the chair he would hold for eleven years.

Attendance bottomed at two million one hundred and twenty-three thousand in 2014, the lowest this club has ever drawn.

And in the 2017 draft, with the first overall pick, they took Antonio Reyna.

V

Toronto

2018 – 2023

The turn was as abrupt as the fall had been.

Eighty-five wins in 2018 and an October, and Jung-choon Hwang hit .300-odd with power at second base and was named both Rookie of the Year and Most Valuable Player of the Ice Conference in the same season. Ninety-three in 2019, and in midsummer the club acquired Nick Henson from Philadelphia and he went six and one with a 1.68 the rest of the way and won the Cy Young Award of the Ice Conference.

In 2020 the franchise moved to Toronto and won ninety-eight games. Antonio Reyna, in his second season, hit his way to Rookie of the Year and Most Valuable Player of the Ice Conference — the second man in three years to take both in one season for this club. Henson went fifteen and two and won a second Cy Young. Jesús Apraksin and Reyna won Silver Sluggers. Miguel Carrillo and Leonardo Torricelli took postseason rounds.

A Hundred Wins: 2021

The 2021 Toronto Griffins won a hundred games and lost sixty-two and took the division, and four men on the roster had seasons that would headline most franchise histories.

Travis Eaton hit .330 with fifty-nine home runs, a hundred and thirty runs batted in and a hundred and thirty-eight runs scored, worth nine wins above replacement, and was named Most Valuable Player of

the Ice Conference. Antonio Reyna hit .320 with thirty-six home runs and a hundred and twenty-two driven in. Jung-choon Hwang hit .324 with thirty-five home runs. Nick Henson went eighteen and four with a 2.55 and two hundred and fifty-six strikeouts and won his third consecutive Cy Young Award, which made it seven in a row for him across two clubs.

Three million five hundred and nineteen thousand people came through Griffins Park.

They lost in October.

In 2022 they won ninety-seven and another flag, and Antonio Reyna was Most Valuable Player again, and they lost in October. In 2023 Reyna won a third MVP in four years, and the club finished fourth at eighty-two and eighty.

Then Reyna was gone, and Henson was gone, and Eaton was gone to the New York Empire, where he would win an MVP of his own two years later.

VI

The Third One

2024 – 2031

Seventy wins in 2024. Fifty-five in 2025, which is forty-five fewer than the club won in 2021, and the third time this franchise has fallen that far that fast.

Seventy in 2026, seventy-seven, seventy-three, eighty-four, seventy-nine, seventy-nine. Nine consecutive seasons out of October now, from 2023, which is the longest drought this club has known.

Nine years is the longest either half of this animal has held the field alone. It is also the third time the franchise has gone from magnificent to dreadful with nothing in between to explain it, and the third time the city has been asked to take on faith that the other half is still in there somewhere.

But the pattern of this franchise is that it does not sit still for long, and the pieces are arriving again. Jason Mills was named Rookie of the Year of the Ice Conference in 2029 and won a Silver Slugger in 2030. Luis Martinez has hit a hundred and fifty-five home runs in six seasons. Tim Hart has hit a hundred and ninety-eight in six. Jose Figueroa has hit a hundred and eighty-six in seven. Ken Henderson, a twenty-third-round pick taken seven hundred and twenty-eighth overall, has made a hundred and sixty starts and struck out one thousand three hundred and twenty-seven men. Zachary Heal, the second pick of the 2026 draft, and Kevin Vidovic, the ninth pick of 2025, are both in the rotation. Alex Sanchez was named Rookie of the Year of the Ice Conference in 2031.

Not one of them has played a postseason game. That is the whole of what can honestly be said about them, and in Toronto it has always been enough.

Two million six hundred and seventy-six thousand people came out in 2031 to watch a seventy-nine-win team, which is more than most contenders in this league draw.

VII

What the Bestiaries Could Not Settle

Thirty-one seasons. Two thousand four hundred and forty-four wins against two thousand five hundred and seventy-nine losses, .487 — a losing record held by a club with two championships, six division flags and twelve Octobers.

That is the whole argument about the griffin, rendered in a ledger. This franchise has been magnificent in twelve of its thirty-one years and genuinely dreadful in about nine, and there is almost no middle. It has won a hundred games and it has lost a hundred and twelve, and it did both within four years of a championship on each occasion.

Seven Most Valuable Players: Chad Keyes, Ryan Roach, Jung-choon Hwang, Travis Eaton, and Antonio Reyna three times. Three Cy Young Awards, all to Nick Henson, in three consecutive seasons. Three Rookies of the Year.

And the Hall: Gary Smith, who gave the club thirteen seasons and nearly nineteen hundred games and belongs to nobody else; Alex Lopez, who won twenty games here in 2004 and came back a decade later to finish; Shane Markward, who threw three hundred and nineteen relief appearances in six seasons and is in the Hall on the strength of them. Ryan Roach, elected in 2028, played five of his sixteen seasons here. Nick Henson, elected in 2030, gave the club five seasons and three Cy Youngs and belongs to Philadelphia by a hundred and twenty-two games. Four more men in the Hall passed through: Pat Pharo for four hundred and forty-two games, Aaron Horsfall for 311, Jason Kollar for 293 and Ricardo Anguiano for 83.

Nine Hall of Famers have worn this uniform. Only the Huron Herons have had more.

The bestiaries could not decide whether the griffin was noble or monstrous, and the honest answer is that it is a creature that has both natures and no way to choose between them on any given morning. Toronto has been the best team in this league and the worst team in this league, sometimes eighteen months apart, for thirty-one years.

It is currently seventy-nine and eighty-three, with a Rookie of the Year in the lineup and two first-round arms in the rotation, which in this franchise's history has meant either nothing at all or ninety-eight wins. There is no telling which, and there never has been.

The Ledger

Franchise founded: 2001 (charter member, The Big League), as the New York Griffins

Relocations: Toronto Griffins, 2020

Home: Griffins Park, Toronto — capacity 45,000

Conference: Ice Conference, Sapphire Division

All-time regular-season record (2001–2031): 2,444–2,579 (.487)

Postseason appearances: 12 in 31 seasons

League Championships: 2 — 2004 (over the Phoenix Firebirds) and 2010 (over the San Diego Seals), both as the New York Griffins

Championship series appearances: 2 — 2004 (won over the Phoenix Firebirds), 2010 (won over the San Diego Seals)

Division titles: 6 — 2004, 2006, 2010, 2011, 2021, 2022

Best season: 2004 (101–61)

Worst season: 2007 (50–112)

Most Valuable Players: 7 — Chad Keyes (2009), Ryan Roach (2012), Jung-choon Hwang (2018), Antonio Reyna (2020, 2022, 2023), Travis Eaton (2021)

Cy Young Awards: 3 — Nick Henson (2019, 2020, 2021)

Rookies of the Year: 5 — Todd Graham (2002), Jung-choon Hwang (2018), Antonio Reyna (2020), Jason Mills (2029), Alex Sanchez (2031)

Hall of Famers: three of its own — Gary Smith (2017), Alex Lopez (2020) and Shane Markward (2029). Ryan Roach, elected in 2028, played 593 of his 2,027 games here, and Nick Henson, elected in 2030, 139 of his 497. Four more passed through: Pat Pharo for 442 games, Aaron Horsfall for 311, Jason Kollar for 293 and Ricardo Anguiano for 83

Managers: Daniel Palmer (2001–2011), John Maddox (2012), Tony Godinez (2013–2023), T.J. Ferruzza (2024–)

General managers: Matt Cabo (2001–2011), Brent B (2012), Thayne B (2013–2023), Keven X (2024–)

Longest postseason drought: 9 seasons (2023–2031, still running; before that, six from 2012 to 2017)

Consecutive Octobers: 5 (2018–2022)

Best attendance: 3,524,677 (2022)

Pillars of the Franchise

Gary Smith, RF (2001–2013) — The greatest Griffin, and the only one whose whole career belongs here. Thirteen seasons, 1,899 games, a .289 average, 2,144 hits, 445 doubles, 297 home runs and 1,017 runs batted in, worth 64.4 wins above replacement. Silver Sluggers in 2001, 2004 and 2006, Gold Gloves in 2001 and 2011, and the most valuable player award of the opening round of the 2001 postseason, the first playoff series this club won. First round, 22nd overall. Elected to the Hall of Fame in 2017.

Antonio Reyna, LF (2019–2023) — Most Valuable Player of the Ice Conference in 2020, 2022 and 2023, and Rookie of the Year in 2020, all before his twenty-fifth birthday. Five seasons, 632 games, a .311 average, 152 home runs and 457 runs batted in, worth 30.6 wins above replacement, with Silver Sluggers in four consecutive seasons. The first overall pick of the 2017 draft.

Jung-choon Hwang, 2B (2018–2027) — Rookie of the Year and Most Valuable Player of the Ice Conference in the same season, 2018. Ten seasons, 1,363 games, a .292 average, 279 home runs and 780 runs batted in at second base, worth 48.2 wins above replacement, with Silver Sluggers in 2018, 2021 and 2022. He hit .324 with 35 home runs on the hundred-win club.

Alex Lopez, SP (2002–2008, 2013) — Eight seasons in two stints, 239 starts, 1,540 innings, 105-77 with a 3.45 earned run average, worth 33.8 wins above replacement. He went 20-9 on the 2004 championship club and 20-7 in 2006. Second round, 30th overall, by the Louisville Rivermen. Elected to the Hall of Fame in 2020, with 225 career wins.

Enrique Munoz, 1B (2001–2008) — Eight seasons, 1,107 games, a .286 average, 255 home runs and 700 runs batted in, all of it for this club, worth 36.4 wins above replacement. A Silver Slugger in 2001, and most valuable player of the opening round in 2003 and of the conference championship series in the 2004 title run. Second round, 35th overall.

Nick Henson, SP (2019–2023) — Cy Young Award winner of the Ice Conference in 2019, 2020 and 2021, three consecutive seasons and the last three of seven in a row he won across two clubs. Five seasons here, 139 starts, 829 innings, 66-23, a 2.70 earned run average and 1,020 strikeouts, worth 29.4 wins above replacement. Elected to the Hall of Fame in 2030; Philadelphia is his primary club.

Travis Eaton, 1B (2020–2024) — Most Valuable Player of the Ice Conference in 2021, when he hit .330 with 59 home runs, 130 runs batted in and 138 runs scored on the hundred-win team. Five seasons, 667

games, a .310 average and 157 home runs. First round, 25th overall, in the 2015 draft, and he went on to win a second MVP for the New York Empire.

Ryan Roach, CF (2009–2013) — Most Valuable Player of the Ice Conference in 2012. Five seasons, 593 games, a .272 average, 95 home runs and 197 stolen bases, worth 29.6 wins above replacement, with Silver Sluggers in 2010, 2011 and 2012 and Gold Gloves in 2010 and 2011. The first overall pick of the 2008 draft. Elected to the Hall of Fame in 2028 for a career whose larger part was spent in Somerville.

Jose Rosales, LF (2018–2026) — Nine seasons, 1,375 games, 282 home runs and 802 walks, worth 30.5 wins above replacement, the everyday left fielder through the whole Toronto run. First round, second overall, 2015.

Ryan Thompson, 2B (2009–2016) — Eight seasons, 1,129 games, a .280 average and 289 doubles, and most valuable player of the divisional round in the 2010 championship run. First round, 25th overall, 2007, by the Huron Herons.

Chad Keyes, RF (2009–2012) — Most Valuable Player of the Ice Conference in 2009, and most valuable player of both the conference championship series and the Big League Championship Series in 2010, which no one else in this franchise's history has done. Four seasons, 552 games, a .271 average and 141 home runs. First round, 28th overall, 2003, by the Atlanta Smashers.

Shane Markward, RP (2002–2007) — 319 relief appearances, 426 innings, 28-13 with a 2.36 earned run average and 37 saves, the bullpen through the first great era. Fifth round, 139th overall, by the Louisville Rivermen. Elected to the Hall of Fame in 2029.

Raul Salinas, SP (2007–2014) — Eight seasons, 207 starts, 1,334 innings and 83-65, the arm that held the rotation together through the worst of the first collapse and the best of the second rise.

Jeff O'Malley, LF (2009–2016) — Eight seasons, 1,085 games and 127 stolen bases, an everyday outfielder on both the 2010 champion and the 53-win club of 2014. First round, eighteenth overall, 2008.

Ken Henderson, SP (2026–2031) — Six seasons, 160 starts, 1,022 innings, 60-59 and a 3.82 earned run average with 1,327 strikeouts, the best arm of the current rebuild. A twenty-third-round pick, 728th overall, in 2020.

Chris Robertson, 1B (2001–2005) — Five seasons, 765 games, a .271 average and 142 home runs, with Silver Sluggers in 2003 and 2004 and 33 home runs on the first championship club.

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