

Capsized Franchise Has Only Sunk Further Into Despair

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For many [Islanders](#) fans, the good old days are painfully difficult to remember not because they were not good but because the team that won four straight Stanley Cups in the 1980s has morphed into a derelict franchise that has alienated all but its most die-hard followers.

Since those glory years, the Islanders have lurched from one troubled owner to another. A carousel of general managers has fired a parade of coaches. Players have skated in front of fewer and fewer fans, some of whom have sat with umbrellas open because of Nassau Coliseum's leaky roof.

In 2000, [Charles B. Wang](#) and [Sanjay Kumar](#) bought the team and vowed to halt the long fall and to revitalize what was once considered a model franchise with stable management and devoted players. Proud immigrants whose company, Computer Associates, was based on Long Island, they wanted to give back to the community by saving the team.

Although they were hockey neophytes who read "Hockey for Dummies," co-written by John Davidson, a former Rangers goaltender, they were realistic.

"Let's face it: the Coliseum is a dump, and the team, well, they're losers," Wang said at the time. "It's a real shame. We want to see it change because this is our home. We all deserve better."

The team ultimately did not change, or at least not enough. On Wang's watch, the Islanders have made the postseason four times and have not won a series. Attendance perked up for a few years when Wang spent freely but dwindled after he slashed payroll to offset growing losses. He has gone without a team president, and the Islanders switched from their flagship radio station to one run by Hofstra University.

Fans, tired of watching games in a drafty, 40-year-old arena, have stayed away. The Islanders averaged 13,191 fans a game last season, second worst in the league and just ahead of the Phoenix Coyotes.

Like his predecessors, Wang fought hard to get a new arena that might generate the extra revenue needed to sign better players and reel in big sponsors and free-spending fans. He also tried to get out from under a lopsided deal with SMG, the company that runs the Coliseum on behalf of Nassau County.

Like his predecessors, Wang has fought a losing battle.

In 2004, he proposed a grand plan to refurbish the Coliseum and build apartments, stores and an office tower nearby. The project turned into a political football as Democrats and Republicans opposed and supported it. When that failed, a far slimmer plan was sent last year to voters, who resoundingly said no.

In between, Wang looked for leverage, even taking the Islanders to Kansas City, Mo., for an exhibition game. Then, Brooklyn, with its Barclays Center, made a deal too good to turn down. The team will depart after its lease expires at the Coliseum in 2015, more than three decades after its last championship. "It's tough to see them move when they should have a team on Long Island," said Al Arbour, the coach of the Stanley Cup teams, who now lives in Florida. "They got into a pickle and didn't move up in the playoffs. That cost them."

Since Arbour left in 1994 after his second stint coaching the Islanders, a dozen coaches have led the team, which began as an expansion franchise in 1972. After lobbying by William Shea, who ushered the Mets into existence, the N.H.L. agreed to put a team in the newly built Coliseum to prevent the fledgling World Hockey Association from getting there first.

After a first season that included 12 wins, the Islanders quickly transformed into a powerhouse whose accomplishments dwarfed those of the Rangers, their bitter and more glamorous rivals. Led by the Hall of Famers Mike Bossy, Bryan Trottier, Denis Potvin and Billy Smith, they won a record 19 straight playoff series.

Given the trouble that followed, those players seem almost glad the team is moving.

"I felt terrible that the team won't be there anymore, but I'm behind Charles 100 percent," Bossy, now the team's vice president of corporate sponsorships, said Wednesday. "Today's today; yesterday's yesterday. We did what we did where we did, and now that's changing."

Not long after Bossy retired, the team began its long slide. In 1992, John O. Pickett Jr., the longtime owner, sold 10 percent of the team to four businessmen who were tasked with running the Islanders. Other than a magical run in the 1992-93 playoffs, the Islanders failed to impress.

In 1997, John Spano agreed to pay Pickett \$165 million for the team and its cable television contract. But Spano was later convicted of bank and wire fraud for illegally obtaining loans to buy the team, so Pickett ended up selling the next year to Edward and Howard Milstein and Steven Gluckstern.

The group, which ended up losing about \$40 million before it sold to Wang and Kumar, sued SMG over safety concerns and briefly moved the team's furniture, files and memorabilia in a convoy of vans to an office in Manhattan. The group explored playing games in arenas as far away as Hartford.

In some ways, the Islanders have outgrown Long Island, from which young people have fled to states where it is cheaper to live and jobs are more plentiful.

“It was a dying franchise in an economy that has continued to decline,” said Martin Cantor, the director of the Long Island Center for Socio-Economic Policy.

But mainly, the Islanders have been undone by a rogues’ gallery of managers and politicians unwilling or unable to help. This ought to upset the devoted fans. But after years of distress, they, too, seem hopeful that Brooklyn might prove more fertile.

“I thought I’d be angry, but now I’m excited,” said Larry Ziegler, who lives in East Meadow, about a mile from the Coliseum, and has had season tickets for nearly 20 years. “I see that they need to move to get to where they need to get to.”

Jeff Z. Klein contributed reporting.