



THE BALTIMORE BLUE CRABS

A Franchise History of The Big League — 2001 to 2031

Down the bay and back again. Two cities, three names, one piece of unfinished business.

In the style of Geoffrey C. Ward

PROLOGUE

The Tide Goes Out and Comes Back

The blue crab is the only creature in the Chesapeake that has ever mattered to Baltimore's sense of itself.

It is not a noble animal. It is armored, sideways-walking, bad-tempered, and it does not migrate so much as it moves with the water — down the bay when the cold comes, back up when it warms, following the salt line wherever the salt line goes. Watermen have known for centuries that you do not ask a crab to stay put. You ask only where the water has taken it this year, and you go there.

This franchise has done exactly that, twice.

It began in Baltimore in 2001 as the **Admirals**, spent six seasons in the harbor, and then followed the money down the Potomac. From 2007 through 2022 it played in the capital as the **Washington Generals**, and there it built the best teams in its history — three straight division titles, a 108-win season, a championship series. Then, in 2023, the water turned again and the club came home, renamed for the animal that comes back. They are the **Blue Crabs** now.

Thirty-one seasons. Two cities, three names, seventeen Octobers, six division flags, one championship series, and no trophy.

This is the story of a franchise that has been very good for a very long time in two different places, and of a city that got it back.

I

The Admirals

2001 – 2006

They opened badly and recovered fast.

The 2001 Admirals lost ninety-six games, and Danny Gonzalez's Gold Glove was the only ornament on the season. But by 2002 the club had climbed to eighty-six wins, with Troy Oliver taking a Silver Slugger, and the Baltimore years that followed were the story of a franchise assembling itself in public: eighty-six wins, then eighty-five, then eighty-four, then eighty, then eighty-four again. Never a contender. Never embarrassing. Third, fourth or fifth place, every year, in a league that had already sorted itself into haves and have-nots.

What those years produced was **Jason Kollar**.

He arrived in 2003, won the Ice Conference Rookie of the Year award, and took a Silver Slugger in the same season. The following year, at twenty-three, he won the conference **Most Valuable Player** award — the first in franchise history. He would take Silver Sluggers in 2003, 2004, 2005, 2007 and 2008, and in ten seasons with this franchise he hit .293 with 1,508 hits, two hundred and twenty home runs — still the club record — and eight hundred and fifty-six runs batted in. He was the best thing about the Admirals, and he was still there when the moving vans came.

He was not alone in it. Ed Ventura won a Gold Glove in 2003 and Carlos Lozano a Silver Slugger in 2006, and the harbor turned out for all of it. More than three million people came through the gates that last Baltimore summer, the first time the club had ever crossed that line and the most it would ever draw in the harbor. Whatever went wrong here, the city had not done it.

Because after the 2006 season, the franchise left.

II

The Generals

2007 – 2011

Washington was, at first, exactly what Baltimore had been: good enough to be interesting, not good enough to matter.

The 2007 Generals won ninety-three games and made the franchise's first postseason appearance, which felt like vindication for the move, and then went out without winning a series. Jason Kollar had come down the Potomac with them and took Silver Sluggers in each of the first two capital summers, the last good years of a career that had begun in the harbor. It was the same club in a different city, and for a season or two that was enough.

Then the bottom went out of it. Eighty wins in 2008, and then 2009: sixty-five and ninety-seven, the worst season this franchise has ever had in either city, and the thinnest crowd Washington ever drew. George Newton and Jeff Freeman had taken Gold Gloves the year before and Sakan Matsumura took one in the wreckage, which is the sort of consolation a bad team hands out.

The recovery was not dramatic and nobody wrote about it. Seventy-nine wins in 2010. Then, in 2011, eighty-six and a second October, with **Ben Fowler** taking a Silver Slugger and the wild card series MVP award, **Fred Cox** — a .318 career hitter, the purest bat the franchise ever had — beginning the best stretch of his life, and Mark Keating winning a Gold Glove behind them.

The roster was quietly getting very good. Nobody outside the capital had noticed yet.

III

The Great Generals

2012 – 2015

For four seasons this franchise was one of the two or three best teams in The Big League, and it is the part of the history that a fan base in Baltimore now has to claim secondhand.

103 wins in 2012. First place, the first division flag the franchise ever won. **Justin Shoemaker** won Rookie of the Year and a Silver Slugger; Fred Cox took the division series MVP; Korey Crayton and Josh Gunter won Gold Gloves.

108 wins in 2013 — still the best season in franchise history. A second division title. **Korey Crayton** won the Ice Conference Most Valuable Player award, the second in franchise history, in a season where he hit only .210 and won a Gold Glove, which tells you exactly what kind of player he was and exactly how much the voters valued the glove that year. Chad Keyes took the conference series MVP, Gunter the division round, and Washington reached the **championship series** — the only one in the franchise's thirty-one years.

They lost it to Milwaukee.

105 wins in 2014. A third straight division flag, Gunter again the division series MVP, and another October ending short. **90 wins in 2015**, a fourth straight postseason berth, Silver Sluggers for Shoemaker and Jamie Sturmer.

Four seasons, four hundred and six wins, three division titles, one championship series, no trophy. Then the arms aged and the window shut, hard: seventy-six wins in 2016, 75 in 2017, 79 in 2018.

IV

The Long Middle

2016 – 2022

The back half of the Washington era was the least distinguished stretch in the franchise's life, and the shape of it is the shape of a club going sideways.

Seventy-six wins in 2016, seventy-five in 2017, seventy-nine in 2018. Justin Shoemaker went on hitting through all of it, taking another Silver Slugger in 2016 to go with the ones he had won on the great teams, and Jamie Sturmer won a Gold Glove in each of those first two summers. Milo Koljevic took a Silver Slugger in 2017. They were good players on a club that had stopped being one, which is the most ordinary way a window closes.

Then, out of very little, **2019**: ninety-five wins and a division flag, and **Carlos Zuniga** taking the Ice Conference Rookie of the Year award with a Silver Slugger beside it. Zuniga would go on to give this franchise twelve seasons and 1,856 games without ever playing anywhere else, the most loyal player in its history. Three and a half million people came to watch that summer, the best gate the capital ever gave them. They lost in October anyway.

Eighty-two wins and another October in 2020. Then sixty-six in 2021 — the same number the Admirals had managed in the franchise's first summer, twenty years earlier and two cities ago. Then eighty-eight and a third berth in 2022, with Eric Barrineau winning a Gold Glove.

What is strange about the Washington ending is that nothing forced it. The capital never stopped coming: better than three million in the final season there, as many as it had drawn in the great years. The club simply looked up one winter and found that the water had moved. A crab does not argue with the salt line. It goes where the salt line goes.

Then they went home.

v

Home

2023 – 2030

The Blue Crabs have been, from their first day back, a good baseball team, and the city has behaved like one that got something returned to it rather than one that was owed it.

Ninety wins and a postseason berth in the first season home, with **Craig Lord** taking the wild card round and **Guadalupe Roldan** the division series. Eighty-eight and another October in 2024, Zuniga the wild card MVP in the last full summer of his one long career, with Gold Gloves for Steve Westbrook and Eric Barrineau. Eighty-nine and a berth in 2025. Ninety and a berth in 2026. Four seasons back, four Octobers, and a ballpark on the harbor drawing better than three million every year of it.

Then **2027**: ninety-eight wins and the franchise's fifth division title, and the first the city of Baltimore had ever seen, the Admirals having gone six seasons without one. **Vicente Chavez** took the division round and **Jimmy Regula** the wild card, and Braxton Matheson won a Gold Glove.

Five straight winning seasons. Five straight Octobers. One flag, and every one of them ending the same way.

The stumble came in 2028, seventy-eight and eighty-four, the only losing season the Blue Crabs have had. Francisco Rodriguez took a Silver Slugger in it, which was most of what there was to take. And then the best two years the franchise has had since the capital: **a hundred wins in 2029**, with Victor Barboza's Silver Slugger and Rodriguez carrying the wild card round, and **a hundred again in 2030**, and a sixth division flag with it.

Two consecutive hundred-win seasons. In thirty-one years the franchise had managed exactly two before that, both in Washington, both inside the great window, and a decade apart from these. The Blue Crabs did it back to back and nobody outside the Chesapeake made much of it.

The crab had come back up the bay, and found the water warm.

VI

Where It Stands (2031)

The 2031 season was the first uneven one of the Baltimore era: 83-80, fifth place, and a postseason berth anyway, with **Jorge Soto** taking the wild card series MVP and a Gold Glove.

It is the ninth October in the nine seasons since the club came home, and that is the number worth sitting with. Nine seasons back in Baltimore, nine trips to the postseason. The Washington era, for all its 108-win summers, managed nine berths in sixteen years. The city that got the franchise back has had a contender every single year it has held it.

What it has not had, and what neither city has ever had, is the last series. One championship series in thirty-one seasons, in 2013, in a different city, under a different name, lost.

The crab moves with the water. It has been down the bay and back up again, and the water is where it started. Thirty-one years in, this franchise has 2,671 wins, seventeen Octobers, six flags, two MVPs, and one unfinished piece of business that has now outlasted two identities and a relocation in each direction.

The Ledger

Franchise founded: 2001 (charter member, The Big League — as the Baltimore Admirals)

Relocations: Baltimore → Washington (2007, renamed the Generals); Washington → Baltimore (2023, renamed the Blue Crabs)

Current identity: Baltimore Blue Crabs

Home: Blue Crabs Field, Baltimore — capacity 45,000

Conference: Ice Conference, Sapphire Division

All-time regular-season record (2001–2031): 2,671–2,353 (.532)

Postseason appearances: 17 in 31 seasons

League Championships: 0

Championship series appearances: 1 — 2013 (lost to the Milwaukee Mobsters)

Division titles: 6 — 2012, 2013, 2014, 2019, 2027, 2030

Best season: 2013 (108–54)

Worst season: 2009 (65–97)

Most Valuable Players: 2 — Jason Kollar (2004), Korey Crayton (2013)

Cy Young Awards: 0

Rookies of the Year: 3 — Jason Kollar (2003), Justin Shoemaker (2012), Carlos Zuniga (2019)

Hall of Famers: 1 — Jason Kollar (2020)

General managers: Steve B (2001–)

Admirals era (2001–2006): 485–488 — 0 postseason berths

Generals era (2007–2022): 1,420–1,242 — 9 postseason berths, 1 championship series

Blue Crabs era (2023–2031): 816–643 — 9 postseason berths in 9 seasons

Pillars of the Franchise

Jason Kollar (2003–2012) — The franchise's first great player and its first Most Valuable Player, in 2004. Rookie of the Year in 2003 and a five-time Silver Slugger, he hit .293 with 1,508 hits, 220 home runs and 856 runs batted in across ten seasons here, and still holds the franchise home run record. He

played for the Admirals and the Generals both, and he is the bridge between the two; the last five years of his career were spent elsewhere. **Hall of Fame, inducted 2020.**

Justin Shoemaker (2012–2019) — Rookie of the Year in 2012 and the offensive centerpiece of the 108-win club. A .299 hitter across eight seasons, all of them for this franchise, with four Silver Sluggers and a Gold Glove.

Carlos Zuniga (2019–2030) — Rookie of the Year in 2019 and the most loyal player the franchise has had: twelve seasons, 1,856 games — the most in club history — 1,897 hits, and not one inning for anyone else. He spanned the end of Washington and the whole rise of Baltimore.

Korey Crayton (2010–2014) — Ice Conference Most Valuable Player in 2013, the year the franchise won 108 games and reached its only championship series, on the strength of a Gold Glove and a defensive value the box score never captured. A .216 hitter in five seasons here, .210 for his career, and an MVP, which is a sentence worth reading twice.

Fred Cox (2007–2015) — The best pure hitter in franchise history, at .326 across nine seasons here, with 1,472 hits and the 2012 division series MVP award.

Josh Gunter (2010–2017) — Two Gold Gloves, two division series MVP awards in consecutive Octobers (2013 and 2014), and 804 runs batted in over eight seasons here.

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