



THE GALVESTON GREMLINS

A Franchise History of The Big League — 2001 to 2031

An island that rebuilds. A franchise that bets. The long search for the far shore.

In the style of Geoffrey C. Ward

PROLOGUE

The Island That Rebuilds

Galveston has always lived a little closer to the water than was safe.

It is an island city, a thin strip of sand and grit thrown up against the Gulf, a place that has been knocked flat by storms more than once and has each time done the only thing it knows how to do — clear the wreckage, drive the pilings deeper, and build again. The people there do not measure themselves by whether the next storm comes. It always comes. They measure themselves by what they put back up after it does.

When The Big League was born in the winter of 2000, the men who named the island's club did not reach for something grand or untouchable. They reached for something restless and a little ornery, something that fit a town that had learned to laugh at the weather. They called them the Gremlins.

For twenty-nine seasons that is exactly what they have been — a club that never sits still, never quite settles, always tinkering, always betting. In a league of thirty-two teams, the Gremlins have reached the postseason eleven times, won a single division flag, and twice climbed within one good week of a championship. They have never won it. For twenty-nine years they had never produced a Most Valuable Player either, and then, in 2030, one of their own finally took it. Their history is written almost entirely in the narrow margin between *nearly* and *not quite* — the foot of water between the boat and the dock.

This is not the story of a dynasty. It is the story of three men who each took the wheel, each made one enormous bet with the franchise's future, and each watched the tide answer differently. It is the story of the island that keeps rebuilding.

This is the story of high water, and low.

I

The Founding and the Gamble

2001 – 2004

The Big League began the way the Gulf begins a season — flat and warm and full of false calm. In the spring of 2001 every club was brand new, every roster drawn from the same common pool, every fan base holding a blank ledger. The Gremlins' first was kept by a young general manager named **Matt Carlisle**, and from his first week on the job Carlisle made one thing plain: he did not intend to wait his turn.

That first team went 75–87 — competitive in flashes, thin in the places that decide September. A patient man might have stood pat and let it grow. Carlisle was not a patient man. In July of 2001 he made the move that would define not only his tenure but the entire temperament of the franchise: he traded his most promising young bat, catcher **Marcello Bland**, to Philadelphia for the Eagles' top five picks in the 2002 draft and their first-rounder in 2003.

It was a staggering thing to do with a 21-year-old who had hit .330 with power in his half-season on the island. And in the cruelest possible accounting, Bland went on to help Philadelphia win the inaugural TBL Championship and then built a Hall of Fame career with New Orleans — a plaque, a legend, all of it earned in someone else's colors. In Galveston the trade became something else entirely: a philosophy. Carlisle had bet that breadth beats brilliance, that a fistful of picks is worth more than a single cornerstone. The island would spend a generation finding out whether he was right.

The short-term bill came due immediately. Without Bland the 2002 club cratered to **51–111**, one of the worst seasons in league history and a number that would have ended a lesser executive's career. Carlisle did not flinch from it. He used it. The picks arrived, the farm filled, and the climb began: 70–92 in 2003, and then, in 2004, an **89-win season and the franchise's first trip to October**. Third baseman **Randy Scott** announced himself with thirty-eight home runs and a hundred and twenty RBI in a half-season cameo, and reliever **Isaiah Alexander** won the first of what would become four Reliever of the Year awards. Three years after bottoming out at fifty-one wins, the gamble had built a contender on the waterline.

II

High Water

2005 – 2012

For eight seasons in the middle of the franchise's first decade, the Gremlins were genuinely, durably good — never the best team in baseball, but always somewhere in the room with them. It was the high-water mark of the franchise, and it is worth lingering there, because the island has not stood so tall for so long since.

The arms came first. In 2005 a 38-year-old right-hander named **Matthew d'Aguilar** arrived for a single, almost unreasonable season — a 2.62 ERA across two hundred and thirteen innings, two hundred and nineteen strikeouts, and the first **Ice Conference Pitcher of the Year** award in club history — and then was gone, a comet that lit the sky once and burned out. The next year the staff belonged to **Eric Ryan**, a young right-hander who went on a tear that has never quite been matched in Galveston: a 3.00 ERA over

five Gremlins seasons, an **Ice Conference Pitcher of the Year award of his own in 2006**, and the engine of the best team the island has ever fielded.

The Autumn That Came Closest: 2006

Every franchise gets one season it cannot stop replaying. Galveston's is 2006.

They won **a hundred and four games** — the most in club history, before or since, a number that still looks like a typo on the franchise ledger. The lineup was anchored by third baseman **Jeff Brown**, who in 2006 hit .291 with forty-four home runs and a hundred and forty-three RBI, the finest all-around season any Gremlins hitter had produced to that point. Eric Ryan and Isaiah Alexander gave them a front-to-back spine on the mound. And when October came, the island that had bottomed out at fifty-one wins four years earlier found itself playing for the whole thing.

The **TBL Championship Series** went six games. Six games against the Louisville Rivermen, with a title on the far side of it. The Gremlins did not get there. They lost the series, and with it the one real chance the franchise has ever had to hang a championship banner over the Gulf. It remains the closest Galveston has ever come — a hundred and four wins, a pennant series, and a final step that has never stopped echoing.

There would be no collapse afterward, only a long, honorable plateau. Jeff Brown kept mashing — fifty home runs in 2008, a player the original record books badly undersold, finishing his Gremlins career with **two hundred and nineteen home runs and 23.0 WAR** in the orange and black. Isaiah Alexander kept slamming the door, winning Reliever of the Year in 2006, 2007, and 2008 and saving two hundred and forty-eight games as a Gremlin. The 2007 club won eighty-eight and returned to October; the 2008 and 2009 teams stayed firmly in the league's upper tier at 85 and eighty-three wins.

Carlisle, ever restless, kept dealing. In 2008 he sent Eric Ryan to Phoenix for premium picks; a year later he moved Alexander and a young Jeff Brown to the Lehigh Valley Scrapples in a reset that brought back a right-handed starter named **Mike Adamonis** — a deal whose true value would not come clear for another decade. The reload worked almost at once. The Gremlins won the **2010 Jade Division title at 92–70 — the only division flag in franchise history** — and made it three straight Octobers from 2010 through 2012, with Adamonis and a hard-luck ace named **Frank Vaughn** fronting the rotation.

It was the longest stretch of sustained relevance the island has known. Then, slowly, the water began to go out.



The Long Middle, and the Swing That Broke the Rhythm

2013 – 2018

Matt Carlisle stepped away partway through 2013, leaving behind the strongest foundation the Gremlins have ever had — a decade built on nerve, reinvention, and the conviction that one bold move could change everything. The man who inherited it, a general manager named **Chad**, would prove that the same conviction could cut the other way.

The roster Chad took over still carried Carlisle's fingerprints, but it had begun to gray at the edges. He steadied it — an 87–75 finish in 2013, a return to .500-adjacent baseball — and he set about reshaping it the way the franchise always had, with picks and patience. His early years gave the island its next great homegrown star.

Malik Knowles was a shortstop, and for the better part of a decade he was the best position player the franchise had ever developed. He arrived for good in 2014 and hit **.322 with 191 hits and 6.6 WAR**, finishing second in Rookie of the Year voting and serving notice. What followed was the most sustained run of excellence any Gremlin has authored: eleven seasons in orange and black, a **.293 career average, 1,330 hits, 180 home runs, and 34.5 WAR** — every number a franchise benchmark. He was, quietly, the best thing the Gremlins had. He was also never quite enough on his own, which is the oldest story this franchise tells.

In 2015 the island rose one more time. An 88-win club rode Knowles and the veteran arms back into October and all the way to the **Ice Conference Championship**, falling in six hard games to the New Orleans Mudcats — the deepest run since the magic of 2006, and proof that the window had not yet closed.

But it was closing. And here Chad made the decision that has defined his tenure and haunted the franchise ever since.

The Trade That Broke the Rhythm: 2016

In July of 2016, with the roster teetering between one more push and an honest rebuild, Chad went all in. He sent **eight draft picks** to Huron for **Jesse Harnois, Emilio Farach, and Kyle Hula** — the largest pick-for-player swing in the history of The Big League. It was meant to recapture the spark of 2015, to buy a contender outright rather than wait for one to grow.

It did the opposite. The return never landed; the imported players never became the players the island had mortgaged its future for. And the cost was paid in full and on schedule: years of empty draft classes, a farm system hollowed out, a franchise suddenly without the one thing it had always traded on — depth. Galveston missed the playoffs in 2016 and never recovered under Chad. By 2018 the bill arrived all at

once, the roster fracturing into a **59–103 wreck**, the worst season since the founding fire sale. Frank Vaughn, who would leave with **46.6 WAR and a hundred and fifteen wins** as a Gremlin — the most accomplished pitcher in franchise history, and, fittingly, a man who never once won a Pitcher of the Year award — was moved out among the wreckage.

Chad departed after 2018, a tenure of real ambition and real aftermath. He had bet the franchise on a single hand, the way Carlisle once had. This time the tide did not come back in.

IV

Low Tide and the Patient Rebuild

2019 – 2025

The man who walked into the wreckage was a general manager named **Jeremy**, and he arrived with the quiet demeanor of someone who would rather act than explain. He inherited a roster gutted by the final Chad years and a farm system still bleeding from the 2016 trade. What the job demanded was not boldness but its opposite — patience, and the stomach to lose on purpose for a while.

The losing came first, and it came hard. The 2019 club fell to **49–113, the worst season in franchise history**, a full reckoning with everything the previous era had spent. The 2020 team was better only by degree. These were the low-tide years, when Gremlins Grotto echoed and the rebuild was visible only in the box scores of players nobody outside Galveston had heard of yet.

But the structure was going back up, piling deeper than before. A glimmer broke through in **2021**, when a young, ahead-of-schedule club won **eighty-nine games and stormed back into October** for the first time since 2015 — a surprise run that mattered less for how far it went than for what it proved: the Gremlins were building something again. Third baseman **Jesus Amador** emerged as a middle-of-the-order force (.264, a hundred and twenty-two homers across five Gremlins seasons), and outfielder **Victor Rodriguez** turned into one of the league's most disruptive baserunners, swiping two hundred and fifty-five bases in his Galveston years.

The next seasons settled back into the mid-70s in wins — a step back, but not a crisis. Jeremy kept one of the lowest payrolls in the league and refused to force the issue, selective to a fault: just a handful of trades in his entire tenure. The one that mattered came at the 2023 deadline, when he sent Julio Gasca to Phoenix for draft capital and a prospect named **Jorge de la Cruz** — a patient, forward-looking deal, the temperamental opposite of the swing that had broken the franchise seven years earlier. He had learned the lesson Chad's gamble taught. He was building slow, and building to last.

V

The Tide Coming In

2026 – 2029

By the middle of the decade the water was, at last, coming back.

The 2026 club climbed to seventy-seven wins, the 2027 team to 79 — modest numbers on their own, but the trend line underneath them had finally turned the right way, and the names driving it were the franchise's own. Second baseman **Francisco Bernal**, who arrived in the rebuild's depths, became the table-setter the island had been waiting for: a **.279 hitter with 166 steals** and the heartbeat of the new lineup. Around him a genuine core took shape — outfielder **Ashton Turner**, who hit **.293 with power and speed** and finished third in Rookie of the Year voting in 2027; second baseman **David Hiebert**, a left-side power source; a deepening, home-built rotation.

And then, in 2028, the climb crested. The Gremlins won **eighty-seven games and returned to the postseason** — their ninth October, and the first fruit of Jeremy's long, unglamorous rebuild. It was the vindication of the patient bet, the proof that the slow way had been the right way all along.

The 2029 season was, in its own way, the most Galveston season of them all. They won **eighty-nine games — more than the 2028 playoff team — and missed October entirely**, edged out in a brutal Jade Division race. Eighty-nine wins and no October. One more foot of water between the boat and the dock. The franchise that has always lived in that margin found itself there again, on the last page of its third decade, better than it had been in years and still reaching for the step it cannot quite take.

The tide was in. Whether it would carry them all the way to shore was, as it has always been on this island, a question for the next storm.

VI

High Water Again

2030 – 2031

The tide came all the way in.

In 2030 the Gremlins won ninety-six games, the most since the great 2006 club, and went back to October for the tenth time. In 2031 they won ninety and did it again — the first time in franchise history that Galveston has reached the postseason in consecutive seasons twice over, and the first back-to-back

Octobers since 2011 and 2012. Two straight winning Octobers is not a dynasty. On this island it is nearly unprecedented.

And the man who carried it was Ashton Turner.

He had arrived in the rebuild's depths and finished third in Rookie of the Year voting in 2027, a good young outfielder on a bad young team. By 2030 he was the best player in the Ice Conference. He won the Most Valuable Player award that season — the first in the history of the franchise, twenty-nine years after the first pitch — took a Silver Slugger alongside it, and was named Most Valuable Player of the wild card series when October came. He followed it with another Silver Slugger in 2031.

For a franchise whose entire identity was assembled out of near-misses, the arrival of an MVP is a strange and destabilizing thing. It removes the one line that every telling of this story had leaned on. Galveston has been the club that produced no one, that got within a week and went home, that measured itself in the margin. It now has a Most Valuable Player, two straight Octobers, and the third-best record in its division two years running.

What it still does not have is a championship. That remains the whole of it. But the honest reading of 2030 and 2031 is that the patient bet paid, fully and finally — and that the thing the island has been rebuilding toward all these years is, for the first time in a long while, actually in the boat.

VII

Three Hands on the Wheel

There is a way to tell this franchise's story that has nothing to do with wins and losses, and it may be the truest way of all.

Across thirty-one seasons, the Gremlins have been steered by three men — **Matt Carlisle, Chad, and Jeremy** — and each of them, in his time, made exactly one bet that defined everything after it. Carlisle traded a future Hall of Famer for a fistful of picks and built a decade of contention on the wreckage of a 51-win season. Chad mortgaged eight draft classes in a single afternoon and watched the foundation give way beneath him. Jeremy, having seen where the big swing leads, bet on patience instead, and lived to see the tide come back in.

Three different hands, three different temperaments, one unbroken identity: the franchise of the bold bet. The Gremlins have never been a team that waited quietly for things to get better. They have always *done* something — sometimes brilliant, sometimes catastrophic, never dull. It is why they have a 104-win

season and a 49-win season in the same record book. It is why they have been within a week of a championship and within a hair of a hundred losses, sometimes only a few years apart.

They have never won it all. For twenty-nine years they never had a Most Valuable Player, and then Ashton Turner took one. For three decades they have lived in the country between *almost* and *not quite*, on an island that knows that country better than anyone. And every time the water has gone out, they have done the only thing the island knows how to do.

They have built it back up.

The Ledger

Franchise founded: 2001 (charter member, The Big League)

Home: Gremlins Grotto, Galveston — capacity 45,000

Conference: Ice Conference, Jade Division

All-time regular-season record (2001–2031): 2,482–2,542 (.494)

Postseason appearances: 11 in 31 seasons (2004, 2006, 2007, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2015, 2021, 2028, 2030, 2031)

League Championships: 0

Championship series appearances: 1 — 2006 (lost to the Louisville Rivermen, now San Juan Stogies)

Division titles: 1 (2010)

Best season: 2006 (104–58)

Worst season: 2019 (49–113)

Most Valuable Players: 1 — Ashton Turner (2030, Ice Conference)

Cy Young Awards: 2 — Matthew d'Aguilar (2005), Eric Ryan (2006), both Ice Conference

Rookies of the Year: 0

Hall of Famers: none of its own. Three passed briefly through Galveston on the way to a plaque elsewhere: Marcello Bland (87 games), B.J. Swart (69), Omar Gonzalez (48)

General managers: Matt Carlisle (2001–2013), Chad (2013–2018), Jeremy (2018–present)

Pillars of the Franchise

Malik Knowles, SS (2013–2023) — The greatest position player the franchise ever developed. A .293 career hitter with 1,330 hits, 180 home runs, and 34.5 WAR in Galveston, with a .322 rookie season (2014) and a five-year peak as the best bat on the island. Never won an MVP — the recurring Gremlins fate — but came closest of anyone to deserving one.

Frank Vaughn, RHP (2007–2018) — The most accomplished pitcher in club history: 115–90 with a 3.23 ERA, 1,434 strikeouts, and 46.6 WAR across 1,851 Gremlins innings. Finished third in Pitcher of the Year voting in 2011 and never won the award — the great workhorse who anchored the high-water years and was dealt out in the wreckage of 2018.

Jeff Brown, 3B (2004–2009, 2011) — The thunder of the first golden window. 219 home runs and 23.0 WAR as a Gremlin, with a monster 2006 (.291, 44 HR, 143 RBI) and a 50-homer season in 2008. Rookie of the Year runner-up in 2005; the lineup's engine on the 104-win club.

Mike Adamonis, RHP (2011–2018, 2022–2023) — Acquired in the 2009 Lehigh Valley reset and quietly one of the longest-serving Gremlins ever: 97–90, 3.42 ERA, 36.7 WAR over thirteen seasons spanning two eras of the franchise.

Isaiah Alexander, RHP (2002–2009) — The shutdown arm of the early contenders. Four-time Ice Conference Reliever of the Year (2004, 2006, 2007, 2008) with 248 saves and a 2.85 ERA in Galveston.

The aces of '05 and '06: Matthew d'Aguilar (Pitcher of the Year, 2005 — one brilliant season at age 38) and Eric Ryan (Pitcher of the Year, 2006 — the engine of the 104-win team) gave the franchise back-to-back trophies at its peak.

A brush with greatness lost: Hall of Famer **Marcello Bland** was drafted and developed by Galveston (1.18 overall, inaugural draft) before being traded to Philadelphia in 2001 for the picks that built the first contender. He won a championship elsewhere and entered the Hall in a New Orleans cap — the cornerstone the island let go.

The next crew: Jesus Amador and Victor Rodriguez bridged the rebuild; Francisco Bernal, Ashton Turner, David Hiebert, and Jorge de la Cruz are the names carrying the tide back in.

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