



THE LAS VEGAS HIGH ROLLERS

A Franchise History of The Big League — 2001 to 2031

Nineteen Octobers. Two crowns. Over the long run, the house wins.

In the style of Geoffrey C. Ward

PROLOGUE

The House

There is no other city in America that admits, right out loud, what it is.

Las Vegas was built on a single, ruthless piece of arithmetic — that over a long enough run of nights, the house always wins. Not every hand. Not every night. But over the long count, the math comes home. The city does not pretend otherwise. It glitters in the desert precisely because it has made its peace with the odds, and learned to love the long run more than any single roll.

When The Big League was born in the winter of 2000, the men who named the desert club did not reach for some softer image. They reached for the thing the city already understood. They called them the High Rollers — the ones who push the whole stack to the center of the table, who are not in the game to break even.

For the first four years, the house lost. It lost badly. And then, somewhere around the middle of the decade, the math came home — and kept coming home, for the better part of twenty years. In a league of thirty-two teams, the High Rollers made the postseason nineteen times in thirty-one seasons, won seven division flags, and in two unforgettable autumns ran the whole table — back-to-back champions of The Big League, the second of those titles arriving on the back of a 117-win juggernaut that ranks among the finest single seasons the league has ever seen.

This is not the story of a lucky streak. A lucky streak ends. This is the story of a franchise that learned to be the house — and of a desert that watched the chips pile higher, season after season, until the whole table was theirs.

This is the story of the long run.

I

Drawing Dead

2001 – 2004

The Big League began the way a casino opens its doors — every table fresh, every deck unopened, every club in the league brand new and assembled from the same common pool of talent. There were no dynasties yet, no rivalries, no ghosts. What a franchise would become was, that first spring, entirely a matter of what it chose to do with a clean stack of chips.

Las Vegas, for a while, did not do much with them at all.

The first hand was a disaster: **60–102** in 2001, dead last in the division, thirty-one games out of anything that mattered. The desert had named its team for the gambler who plays big, and the gambler was busting. The next three years were a slow, grinding crawl up out of the cellar — sixty-five wins, then 70, then 74 — the kind of incremental, unglamorous progress that fills no seats and hangs no banners. Four straight losing seasons to open the franchise's life.

And yet, hidden inside those lean years, the cards were quietly improving. A young right fielder named **Aaron Harrison** was learning to hit in the desert — .287 with thirty-three home runs as a sophomore in 2003, a .306 hitter who would, by mid-decade, become one of the most dangerous bats in the league. He was the first real chip the High Rollers ever stacked, the proof that the talent could come from inside their own clubhouse. The crowds were thin and the standings were cruel. But the house was learning the count.

What nobody in the desert quite knew, as the 2004 season closed on another sub-.500 finish, was that the next hand was about to come up all aces.

II

The First Jackpot

2005 – 2008

It happened the way a cold table suddenly turns hot — without warning, and all at once.

In 2005 the High Rollers won **ninety-two games**, a 49-win swing from their first year of existence, and reached the postseason for the first time. At the center of the surge was a slugger the franchise had grown into a monster: left fielder **Joaquin Verdugo**, who hit **forty-eight home runs and drove in a hundred and twenty-three** that summer, the kind of middle-of-the-order force the desert had been waiting four years to see. Behind him, a right-handed ace named **Willie Fonseca** went 15–2 with a 2.59 ERA — a winning machine in the one role that wins in October.

And then came the run that announced the High Rollers to the whole league:

A hundred and five wins and the division in 2006. A hundred and seven and the division again in 2007, the most the franchise had won to that point.

Back-to-back division titles. Back-to-back 100-win seasons. In 2006 Verdugo was a wrecking crew — **forty-seven home runs and an enormous a hundred and sixty-three RBI**, one of the great run-producing seasons the franchise has ever housed — while Fonseca turned in a year that still does not look

real: **23–2** with a 3.03 ERA, very nearly perfect in the win column across an entire summer. The desert club had gone from sixty wins to 107 in the span of six years.

They could not, in the end, close the deal. October found a way to send them home each autumn, as it does to thirty-one teams a year. But the 2008 club still won eighty-nine games and reached the postseason a fourth straight time. The High Rollers had become, almost overnight, one of the best teams in baseball.

The jackpot was real. What the desert did not yet know was that this — two division flags and a near-miss or two — was only the *small* score. The big one was still a decade away, and the franchise would have to pass back through the wilderness to reach it.

III

The Cooler

2009 – 2014

In gambling, they call it the cooler — the cold stretch that follows a hot one, when the cards go dead and the chips bleed slowly away. The High Rollers hit theirs in the back half of the decade, and it lasted the better part of six years.

The 2009 club fell to 75–87. Verdugo, the engine of the first jackpot, kept mashing — forty-five homers in 2009, 46 in 2010 — but the supporting cast thinned around him, and the wins did not come the way they had. There were flashes: a 91-win, postseason team in 2010; another 91-win season in 2012 that snuck into October. But there were also empty years — eighty wins, 75, 82 — the standings sagging back toward the middle.

Through it ran a quiet parade of talent passing in and out of the desert. In 2011 a future **Hall of Fame** third baseman, **Kareem Amos**, wore the colors for a single season and gave them a glimpse of greatness — twenty-eight home runs, 29 steals, a .299 average across a hundred and fifty-four games — before moving on, one of several star-crossed stars who touched down in Las Vegas just long enough to be remembered. A third baseman named **Sean Hall** hit .306 over a span of seasons and gave the lineup a steady professional bat. Verdugo played his last full High Rollers season in 2013 and moved on, the great slugger of the first golden window headed elsewhere to finish his career.

By 2014 the club had drifted to 82–80 — respectable, forgettable, the sort of season that vanishes from memory. But the cooler was about to break. Two of the most important players in franchise history had already arrived, or were about to, and the desert was a single hot summer away from the greatest run of baseball it would ever know.

The table was about to turn for good.

IV

The House Always Wins

2015 – 2022

For eight seasons, the Las Vegas High Rollers were not merely good. They were the house — the team the rest of the league had to sit down across from and beat, year after year, knowing the math was against them.

It began in 2015 with **a hundred and two wins**. It did not stop there:

A hundred and two wins and an October in 2015. A hundred and two again and the division in 2016. A hundred and ten and the division in 2017. A hundred and seventeen and the division in 2018, and the championship of The Big League. A hundred and six and the division in 2019, and the championship again. A hundred and nine and a fifth straight flag in 2020. A hundred and five and an October in 2021. Ninety-two and one more in 2022.

Eight straight postseason berths. Five straight division titles. Two championships. Four different seasons of a hundred and five wins or more, and one — 2018 — that crossed into rarefied air almost no team in league history has ever reached. This was not a good team having a good decade. This was a dynasty.

The Franchise: Jason Bassett

Every dynasty has a face. The High Rollers' was a right fielder named **Jason Bassett**, and he was the best position player the franchise has ever produced.

He arrived in 2015 and hit .327 as a 99-RBI rookie, and from there he simply did not stop. In 2017 he had a season for the ages — **fifty-three home runs, a hundred and thirty-seven RBI, a .323 average, and 9.5 WAR**, a campaign that ranks among the finest any High Roller has ever assembled. He hit fifty home runs again in 2019 and drove in a hundred and thirty-seven more. Across the heart of the dynasty he posted WAR figures of 9.5, 7.5, 7.7, 6.2, 8.5, and 8.3 in six consecutive seasons — a sustained peak of greatness that carried two championship teams and a half-dozen division winners.

And he did it, remarkably, for one team and one desert. Across fifteen seasons in Las Vegas colors he piled up **2,285 hits, three hundred and ninety-nine home runs, and 1,398 RBI**, every last one of them a High Roller — the franchise's all-time everything, and the constant at the center of its golden age. He

was there at the beginning of the run and there, still taking his cuts, at the very end of it. If Verdugo lit the first fire, Bassett was the one who never let it go out.

He did not do it alone. A speed-and-power outfielder named **Miguel Gaitan** set the table and terrorized the basepaths, swiping **three hundred and twenty-one bases** in a High Rollers uniform while chipping in real pop — and in 2015 and again in 2016 he was named the Most Valuable Player of the Ice Conference, back to back, the first two MVP awards this franchise ever won. Bassett took the next two, in 2017 and 2019. For five seasons the best player in the conference wore this uniform in four of them. Behind them, the rotation ran deep.

The Years It All Came True: 2018–2019

Every great team deserves one perfect autumn. The High Rollers were greedy. They took two.

The 2018 club won **a hundred and seventeen games** — a number that belongs in a category nearly by itself, one of the highest win totals in the history of The Big League. They lost forty-five times across an entire season. The everyday lineup, anchored by Bassett's MVP-caliber bat, simply overwhelmed the league from April to October. And on the mound stood the ace of the moment, a left-hander named **Mike Standish**, who went **13–2 with a 2.69 ERA** as the front of a championship rotation — backed by the durable **Bobby Bradford**, a 16-game winner three different times for the franchise, who turned in a 14–2 season of his own that year. When the postseason came, the house did not blink. Las Vegas ran the table and won it all.

The club they beat for it was the Huron Herons. And then — the rarest thing in sports — they did it *again*, over the Herons a second time. The 2019 club won a hundred and six games and a second straight championship, Standish again the steady hand (12–5, 2.67), Bassett again the engine (fifty homers, a hundred and thirty-seven RBI). Back-to-back titles. Two desert autumns when every chip on the table slid, at last, to the home side.

The 2020 team that followed may have been the best of the bunch on paper — **a hundred and nine wins**, with Bradford turning in a 16–5, 2.48 masterpiece — but October, which answers to no regular-season résumé, sent them home. It was the only thing the dynasty never quite mastered: the cruelty of a tournament that can undo a 109-win summer in a week. But by then the banners were already hanging. The house had won the only two times it absolutely had to.

The Cost of Being Great

Here is the thing about reaching the postseason eight years running: you will lose in October far more than you win, because everyone does. Thirty-one teams go home unhappy every autumn. The High

Rollers simply made sure they were one of the last few still sitting at the table, year after year — and twice, when it mattered most, they were the last one standing.

They came aching close more than once on either side of those titles. The 110-win 2017 club and the 109-win 2020 club were juggernauts that fell short of the final prize. The 2021 team won a hundred and five and reached October again. Each near-miss stung. But each was also a privilege earned by being good enough to be there at all — and the franchise had learned, the way the city had always known, that you do not measure the house by any single hand. You measure it by the long run. And over the long run, no one in The Big League ran better than Las Vegas.

V

Cashing Out

2023 – 2029

Time is the one opponent the house cannot beat. Even in the desert, the cards eventually cool — and the way the High Rollers fought the fade was a thing of real grit.

The dynasty did not collapse so much as gracefully wind down. The 2023 club still won ninety-one games and made the postseason; the 2024 team won ninety-five and reached October a tenth time in eleven years, the aging core refusing to go quietly. But the margins were thinning. The 2025 season brought the first real reckoning — 77–85, the first losing record since the cooler years — and the back half of the decade settled into the honest, difficult work of turning a roster over.

Through the fade came the most bittersweet thread of all: Bassett, his great power seasons behind him, kept showing up at the ballpark, kept taking his cuts, and kept producing in flashes — a 101-RBI season as late as 2026, at an age when most stars are long retired, still in the only colors he had ever worn. He gave the desert everything he had, right down to the final seasons.

And as he faded, a new face stepped into the light. A left fielder named **Christian Loredó**, who had been one of the most feared hitters in the league elsewhere — a 55-homer, .347 monster in his prime — came to Las Vegas and became the centerpiece of the next era. He hit thirty-six home runs with a .320 average in 2024 and, as the decade closed, was still mashing: **forty-three home runs and a .308 average in 2029**, at an age when he had no business being that good. It was Loredó, more than anyone, who kept the desert competitive as the dynasty's stars walked off into the sunset.

The won-loss column dipped in the late 2020s — eighty wins, then 77 — but the High Rollers were never gone for long. In 2029 they surged back to **ninety wins** and one more trip to October, an eighteenth

postseason berth, proof that even in transition the franchise still knew how to play deep into the fall. The desert had been here before. It knew the cards always turn, if you stay at the table long enough.

VI

The Cards Turn Again

2030 – 2031

They did turn.

The 2030 High Rollers won ninety-three games and went back to October — a nineteenth postseason berth, and the second in a row, from a club the league had already written into its transition years. Christian Loredó had taken the Ice Conference Most Valuable Player award the season before, at an age when the arithmetic says a hitter is finished, and the desert simply kept dealing. In 2030 a rookie named **Jason Aarsvold** won Rookie of the Year, the first of the next generation to arrive with real hardware, and **Travis Williams** took a Silver Slugger.

Then 2031 came, and the table cooled: 77-85, fifth place, no October. Two winning Octobers and then a losing summer, which is exactly the shape the long run has always taken in this city.

Here is the honest accounting of thirty-one seasons. Nineteen Octobers. Seven division flags. Two championships, back to back. A 117-win season and a 60-win season in the same book. An overall record of 2,763-2,261, a .550 clip sustained across three decades, second only to Somerville among all franchises over a full life.

The house does not win every hand. It was never supposed to. It wins over a long enough run of nights, and the High Rollers have now been at the table for thirty-one of them, and they are up. Considerably up. That is the entire thesis of the city, proved out in a ledger.

VII

The Constant

There is one more thing to say, and it may be the truest thing of all.

For nearly the entire rise of this franchise — from the lean years through the first jackpot, through the cooler, and across every single season of the great dynasty — there was one man in the Las Vegas dugout: **David Barrios**.

He took over in 2002, the club a 60-win afterthought, and he did not leave the bench until after the 2022 season. Twenty-one years. He managed the 105- and 107-win clubs of the first golden window. He managed the cooler, when the cards went cold and the desert grew restless. And he managed all of it — the 102-win seasons, the 110-win season, the **117-win season**, and both championships. The banners that hang over the desert are, nearly to a one, his banners. When he finally stepped aside, the franchise handed the chips to **Tyler Inman** and then to **Dan Frankhouser**, who steered the club through the long, graceful cash-out that followed.

But the dynasty belonged to Barrios. He was the dealer who never changed, season after season, turning over the cards while the stars came and went around him — Verdugo and Fonseca, then Bassett and Standish and Bradford. He stood at the same table for the disasters and the jackpots both, and over the long run, the only run that ever mattered in the desert, he made the house win more than almost any manager in the league.

The math came home. It always does, if you play the long game.

The Ledger

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

Home: High Rollers Coliseum, Las Vegas — capacity 45,000

Conference: Ice Conference, Jade Division

All-time regular-season record (2001–2031): 2,763–2,261 (.550)

Postseason appearances: 19 in 31 seasons (most recent: 2030)

League Championships: 2 (2018, 2019) — back-to-back

Championship series appearances: 2 — 2018 (won over the Huron Herons), 2019 (won over the Huron Herons)

Division titles: 7 (2006, 2007, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020)

Best season: 2018 (117–45, .722)

Worst season: 2001 (60–102)

Most Valuable Players: 5 awards / 3 men — Miguel Gaitan (2015, 2016), Jason Bassett (2017, 2019), Christian Loredó (2029). All Ice Conference.

Cy Young Awards: 1 — Jordan Adame (2002, Ice Conference)

Rookies of the Year: 6 — Joaquin Verdugo (2005, Ice Conference), Sean Hall (2007, Ice Conference), Homare Okada (2014, Ice Conference), Jason Bassett (2015, Ice Conference), Rocky Brito (2026, Ice Conference), Jason Aarsvold (2030, Ice Conference)

Hall of Famers: 1 of its own — Aaron Harrison (2016), who played 1,030 of his 1,881 games in the desert. Steve Miller and Pat Pharo each passed through for about 150 games.

Managers: David Barrios (2002–2022)

General managers: Dylan G (2001), Zach R (2002–2022), Tim B (2023–2025), Eric C (2026–)

Pillars of the Franchise

Jason Bassett, RF (2015–2029) — The face of the dynasty and the franchise's greatest position player. **Two-time Ice Conference Most Valuable Player (2017, 2019)** and the 2015 Rookie of the Year. A 53-HR, 9.5-WAR force in his 2017 peak, with six straight seasons above 6 WAR. The one-desert legend: 2,285 hits, 399 home runs, and 1,398 RBI, all in Las Vegas colors, anchoring both championships.

Joaquin Verdugo, LF (2004–2010, 2013) — The slugger who lit the first fire. Six straight seasons of 44+ home runs (2005–2010), including a monstrous 47-HR, 163-RBI campaign in 2006. The middle-of-the-order engine of the first jackpot.

Mike Standish, LHP (2018–2022) — The October ace of the back-to-back champions. 13–2, 2.69 in the 117-win 2018 title season; 12–5, 2.67 the next year. The steady hand at the front of the rotation when it mattered most.

Bobby Bradford, RHP (2013–2020) — The dynasty's workhorse. A 16-game winner three different times, including a 16–2, 2.32 season in 2014 and a 16–5, 2.48 gem in 2020. A decade of front-line dependability.

Willie Fonseca, RHP (2004–2009) — Ace of the first golden window. 15–2 in 2005 and a near-perfect 23–2 in 2006, fronting the 105- and 107-win clubs.

Aaron Harrison — The only Hall of Famer the franchise can properly call its own, **inducted in 2016**, with 1,030 of his 1,881 career games in Las Vegas colors: the bridge between the lean opening years and the first jackpot.

Miguel Gaitan, OF — Back-to-back Ice Conference Most Valuable Player, 2015 and 2016 — the first MVP awards in franchise history. The catalyst of the early dynasty: 321 stolen bases in a High Rollers uniform with real power to go with the speed.

Christian Loredó, LF (2021–2030) — The bridge to the next era. A former 55-homer star who reloaded in the desert: 36 HR and a .320 average in 2024, 43 HR and .308 as late as 2029, keeping Las Vegas dangerous through the cash-out years.

A brush with greatness: Hall of Fame third baseman **Kareem Amos** wore High Rollers colors for a single 2011 season — 28 HR, 29 SB, .299 — the closest the franchise came to housing one of the era's all-time bats in his prime.

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