



THE MEMPHIS BLUES

A Franchise History of The Big League — 2001 to 2031

Twelve bars, three chords, and everybody knows how it ends. They come anyway.

In the style of Geoffrey C. Ward

PROLOGUE

Twelve Bars

The blues is a fixed form. Twelve bars, three chords, and the chords come in an order that everyone in the room already knows before the first note is played. There is no suspense in the structure. The only question is what a man does inside it.

That is the peculiar thing about the form and the reason it has outlasted every fashion that ever passed over it: nobody plays the blues to find out how it ends. They already know how it ends. They play it because the going through is the point.

Thirty-one seasons. Two thousand one hundred and forty-nine wins against two thousand eight hundred and seventy-four losses, a winning percentage of .428, which is the lowest in the Topaz Division by a wide margin and among the lowest in The Big League. Five Octobers in thirty-one years. No championship. No conference championship series. No Big League Championship Series. One division title.

And in the middle of all of it, one summer of a hundred wins that arrived out of nowhere, in the one year in franchise history when nobody was running the club.

I

Carestia

2001 – 2006

The Nashville Blues opened in 2001 with a seventy-six-win season and a first baseman named Scott Carestia, a second-round pick, thirty-sixth overall, who hit fifty-four home runs in his rookie year and drove in a hundred and thirty-two.

In 2002 he hit .322 with forty-eight home runs and a hundred and twenty-seven runs batted in and was named Most Valuable Player of the Fire Conference, and the Blues won eighty-eight games and finished third and went to October. Jon Rivera, a ninth-round pick, two hundred and thirty-first overall, was named Rookie of the Year. Jeremy Pavich hit .308. Three million people came to the ballpark, which is a franchise record that still stands.

They lost in the first round, and then it fell apart, and it stayed apart for a very long time.

Carestia hit .269 with thirty-four home runs in 2003 and the club lost ninety-four games. In 2004 they lost a hundred and four. In 2005, a hundred and three, and Carestia hit .229, and the crowd fell below one million eight hundred thousand. He left after 2006 for Phoenix, having given Nashville six seasons, two hundred and seventeen home runs and three Silver Sluggers, and he remains, twenty-five years later, the only man ever named the most valuable player of his conference while wearing this uniform.

His Hall of Fame ballot ran out in 2020 without an election. He comes before the Veterans Committee in 2032.

II

The Long Bottom

2003 – 2017

There is no graceful way to summarize fifteen years, and this history is not going to pretend there is.

Sixty-eight wins. Fifty-eight. Fifty-nine. Seventy-one. Seventy-two. Sixty-four. Then, out of nothing, ninety-three wins in 2009 and a second-place finish and an October, driven by a rookie catcher named Telma Castanheiro who hit .296 with thirty-six home runs, won Rookie of the Year and a Silver Slugger, and was named most valuable player of the wild card round. Then sixty-eight again. Seventy-four. Sixty-one. Sixty-five. Sixty. Fifty-two, in 2015, which was until recently the worst season the franchise had played. Seventy-two. Fifty-nine.

Attendance fell under one million six hundred thousand in 2015 and stayed near there.

Some good men worked through it, and they deserve their names in the record. Jon Bartlett, the seventh pick of the 2001 draft, played eleven seasons in Nashville, hit two hundred and ninety-six home runs and never once hit .250; in 2005 he hit twenty-nine home runs as a right fielder and went 0-10 with a 7.64 earned run average as a pitcher, in the same season, which is a line that will not be repeated. Jeremy Pavich played eleven years, all of them here, and got sixteen hundred hits. Seth Thomas hit .316 across five seasons, the highest average any regular has posted for this club. Chance Strong hit two hundred and seven home runs. Jeremy Ellis hit .285. Christian Brenner and Armando Sutton, both first-day draft picks, gave the rotation six respectable years apiece on teams that could not support them.

Cody S ran the franchise for all nineteen of those seasons and then some. He is the longest-serving general manager in club history and he presided over almost none of its good days.

III

The Season Nobody Owned: 2020

In 2018 the Blues won eighty-four games and took a wild card, Mike Marino taking the honors in a round they won. In 2019 they slid back to seventy-six, and Cody S left, and the general manager's chair sat empty.

The 2020 Nashville Blues won a hundred games and the division.

It is the only division title in franchise history. It is the best season the club has ever played by seven wins. It came in the one year the organization had nobody in charge of it.

The roster explains nothing and that is what makes it worth telling. There was no star. John Hersey, a shortstop, hit .273 with twenty-four home runs and stole forty-three bases and was the most valuable man on the club at a shade over six wins. After him came a cluster of players worth about three wins apiece and no more: Dave Morgan with twenty-four home runs, Michael Iles with seventeen in a hundred and three games, Tony Gonzalez hitting .301, Angelo Capriati winning a Gold Glove in center, Chris Martinez playing a hundred and sixty games at third, Josh Muskin catching. Armando Sutton went 13-8 with a 3.08 earned run average and Frank Vaughn went 15-8 and Aaron Stelter went 8-8 with a 3.31 and Mike Cannon saved twenty games.

Not one of them had a season anybody would call great. Together they won a hundred games in a city that had watched this club lose ninety a year for most of two decades. Two million nine hundred thousand people came out, the second-best gate the franchise has ever drawn.

They lost in October. Of course they did. Kevin S arrived the following spring, the club won eighty-four and went back to the postseason, and that was the end of it.

IV

Downriver

2022 – 2031

Since 2021 the Blues have not seen October. Ten seasons and counting, which is the longest drought in franchise history and the longest active one in the Topaz Division.

Seventy-three wins in 2022. Sixty in 2023. Sixty-nine. Sixty-six. Seventy-three. Sixty-four in 2027. Fifty-eight in 2028. Seventy-one in 2029. Michael Iles won Gold Gloves in 2021 and 2023 and stole two

hundred and seventeen bases before he was traded. Josh Muskin caught for thirteen seasons and finished with more games in this uniform than any man in franchise history. Eddie Lozano won a Silver Slugger and a Gold Glove. Eric H took the general manager's chair in 2027 and holds it now.

Then, in 2030, the franchise left Nashville for Memphis, two hundred miles down the road and onto the river, and won forty-seven games.

Forty-seven and a hundred and fifteen. It is the worst season in the history of this club by five games and one of the worst anyone has played in The Big League. It happened in the first year under the new name, in the new city, in front of the smallest crowd the franchise has ever drawn.

In 2031 they won sixty-four and finished seventh, and Casey Schnake hit .310 with seventeen home runs in his first full season, and Nachman Cohen won a Gold Glove, and Jamie Bliss hit sixty-seven home runs across four years in right field. There is a little to build on. There usually is.

v

The Going Through

Two thousand eight hundred and seventy-four losses. Twenty-six seasons under .500 out of thirty-one. Ten straight without an October. No trophy, no final, no conference championship series in three decades of trying.

There is no Hall of Fame plaque that belongs to this club. Jim Green, elected in 2014, played four hundred and forty-six of his seventeen hundred and twenty-eight games here and made his name in Philadelphia. Dave Morgan, elected in 2026, played five hundred and fifty-six of his more than two thousand three hundred in Nashville, including the hundred-win summer of 2020, and belongs to Fort Collins. Scott Carestia, who is the best player this franchise has ever had, is not in the Hall and may never be.

And yet the seats keep filling to a million and a half and two million and, twice, to nearly three. Nashville came out in 2020 for a club nobody was running. Memphis came out in 2031 to watch a sixty-four-win team.

That is the form. Everyone in the room knows the chords and everyone knows how it resolves. They come anyway, because the going through is the point, and because every so often, without warning and for no reason anyone can name afterward, somebody bends a note and the whole room stands up.

The Ledger

Franchise founded: 2001 (charter member, The Big League, as the Nashville Blues)

Relocations: 2030, Nashville to Memphis

Home: Blues Stadium, Memphis — capacity 45,000

Conference: Fire Conference, Topaz Division

All-time regular-season record (2001–2031): 2,149–2,874 (.428)

Postseason appearances: 5 in 31 seasons

League Championships: 0

Championship series appearances: 0 — the club has never reached a conference championship series

Division titles: 1 — 2020

Best season: 2020 (100–62)

Worst season: 2030 (47–115)

Most Valuable Players: 1 — Scott Carestia (2002)

Cy Young Awards: 0

Rookies of the Year: 2 — Jon Rivera (2002, Fire Conference), Telma Castanheiro (2009, Fire Conference)

Hall of Famers: none of its own. Jim Green, inducted in 2014, played 446 of his 1,728 career games in Nashville; Dave Morgan, inducted in 2026, played 556 of his 2,317 here, including the 2020 division winner

General managers: Cody S (2001–2019), the chair vacant through 2020, Kevin S (2021–2026), Eric H (2027–)

Hundred-win seasons: 1 — 2020

Hundred-loss seasons: 9 — 2004, 2005, 2012, 2014, 2015, 2017, 2023, 2028, 2030

Longest postseason drought: 10 seasons (2022–2031, active)

Longest run of losing seasons: 10 (2022–2031, active)

Consecutive Octobers: 1

Best attendance: 2,990,949 (2002)

Pillars of the Franchise

Scott Carestia, 1B (2001–2006) — The best player this franchise has had, and the only Most Valuable Player in its history. Six seasons, 905 games, a .265 average, 217 home runs and 598 runs batted in, with three Silver Sluggers. He hit 54 home runs as a rookie in 2001 and .322 with 48 more in his MVP season of 2002. A second-round pick, 36th overall. His regular Hall of Fame ballot ran out in 2020; he returns before the Veterans Committee in 2032.

Josh Muskin, C (2017–2029) — More games than any man in club history: thirteen seasons, 1,609 of them, behind the plate for the worst stretch of the franchise's life and for the 2020 division winner. A .235 average, 169 home runs, 682 runs batted in and Silver Sluggers in 2022 and 2027. A fifth-round pick, 135th overall, in 2012.

Jeremy Pavich, 1B (2001–2011) — Eleven seasons, all of them here, 1,601 games, 1,592 hits and a .270 average. He hit .322 in the club's first season and .311 in 2006 and never played for anyone else. A third-round pick, 77th overall.

Jon Bartlett, RF (2003–2012, 2014) — The seventh pick of the 2001 draft. Eleven seasons as a hitter, 1,403 games, 296 home runs and 763 runs batted in on a .218 average, with a peak of 42 home runs in 2008. He also pitched for the club, badly, going 0-10 with a 7.64 earned run average in 2005 in the same summer he hit 29 home runs.

Michael Iles, RF (2018–2025) — Second overall in the 2014 draft. Eight seasons, 1,002 games, 176 home runs, 583 runs batted in and 217 stolen bases, with Gold Gloves in 2021 and 2023. The best everyday player on the 2020 division winner.

Chris Martinez, 3B (2019–2029) — Second overall in 2016. Eleven seasons at third, 1,352 games, 147 home runs, 163 stolen bases and a Gold Glove in 2023, through the club's move from Nashville to Memphis.

Telma Castanheiro, C (2008–2013) — Rookie of the Year of the Fire Conference in 2009 at .296 with 36 home runs and 98 runs batted in, and most valuable player of that October's opening round, on the 93-win club. Six seasons, 724 games, 154 home runs and two Silver Sluggers.

Chance Strong, 1B (2011–2018) — Eight seasons, 982 games, a .271 average, 207 home runs and 631 runs batted in, and a Silver Slugger in 2014, on clubs that never once finished above fourth. First round, 11th overall, 2008.

Seth Thomas, RF (2006–2010) — Five seasons and a .316 average, the highest any regular has hit for this franchise, with 855 hits and 234 stolen bases in 684 games. A first-round pick, 21st overall.

Christian Brenner, SP (2014–2019) — 164 starts, 1,026 innings, 1,119 strikeouts and a 4.16 earned run average across six seasons in which the club never won more than seventy-two games. A second-round pick, 33rd overall, in 2011.

Armando Sutton, SP (2016–2021) — Six seasons, 173 starts, 61-58 with a 3.77 earned run average, and the ace of the 2020 division winner at 13-8 with a 3.08. Ninth overall in the 2013 draft.

Jeremy Ellis, 1B (2010–2014, 2016–2017) — Eight seasons across two stints, 1,021 games and a .285 average, the steadiest bat of the long bottom. A third-round pick, 58th overall.

Jose Rocha, SP (2008–2012) — Five seasons, 134 starts, 57-47 with a 3.89 earned run average, including 2009, when Nashville won 93 games.

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