



THE MILWAUKEE MOBSTERS

A Franchise History of The Big League — 2001 to 2031

Two crowns, seventeen years apart. A business that never advertised.

In the style of Geoffrey C. Ward

PROLOGUE

The Quiet Business

There is a kind of enterprise that does not advertise. It does not put its name on the building. It does not hold a press conference when it acquires something, and it does not explain itself afterward. It works through people who have known each other a long time, it moves when the moment is right and not before, and when it is finished it is simply finished, and everyone understands what happened without anybody having said it out loud.

That is not how most baseball franchises operate. Most of them are loud. They announce a direction and then spend four years apologizing for it.

The Mobsters are the other kind. In thirty-one seasons this club has won two Big League championships, and the two are separated by seventeen years, and almost nothing about the second one grew out of the first. Different city block, different men, different everything. Both times the organization got quiet, got good, went to work, and was standing at the end holding the trophy while the rest of the league tried to work out when exactly it had happened.

In between there were eight straight summers of nothing at all.

The lesson of this franchise is not that patience is rewarded. It is that an organization can go dark and come back, twice, and that the coming back looks, from the outside, like it happened all at once.

I

Indianapolis

2001 – 2006

The club that took the field in 2001 was called the Indianapolis Predators, and for six seasons it was the most anonymous operation in The Big League. Seventy-one wins in the first year. Eighty-six in the second, which was good for fourth. Seventy-one again. Seventy-four. Eighty-four. Eighty-three. Four hundred and sixty-nine wins against five hundred and three losses, six finishes between fourth and sixth, and not a single October.

Anonymous is not the same as empty. Paddy Cloherty, a right fielder the club had taken in the third round with the fifty-eighth pick, hit .278 with a hundred and thirty-four home runs across five seasons in Indiana and was named Rookie of the Year of the Fire Conference in 2001. Toshitada Nishioka took the

same award two years later. Jon Flohr, a second-round pick, fifty-fifth overall, made his first start in 2001 and would go on to throw more innings in this uniform than any pitcher the franchise has ever had. Chad Drews caught six hundred games and hit a hundred and three home runs before he was thirty.

But the record is the record, and after 2006 the club left. It had drawn under two and a half million in four of six years. Herb D, the general manager who opened the franchise, had given way to Bob M in 2004, and Bob M would run this organization for the next sixteen seasons, which is to say through everything that mattered about its first half.

The Predators moved to Milwaukee, took a new name that fit a working city with a long memory, and in their first season under it won ninety-one games.

II

The Outfit Assembles

2007 – 2010

Whatever the move cost, it worked immediately, and the reason it worked is that the front office had already stocked the shelves.

Ninety-one wins and a wild card in 2007, the first postseason in franchise history. Ninety-one again in 2008, and this time the Mobsters won two rounds before they were stopped, Jim Harris taking the honors in the first and Tony Aponte in the second. Ninety in 2009. Then a stumble to seventy-nine in 2010, the last losing season this club would play for eight years.

The men who made those clubs go were mostly kids. Jose Hernandez, the fourth pick of the 2004 draft, came up in 2007 at twenty-two and hit .300. Jim Harris, a third-round pick, seventy-third overall, arrived the year after and would never wear another uniform. Neil Leighton caught. Mike Hattie ran. Aponte, who had come over from the Kingston Frontenacs, stole forty and fifty bases a summer out of the middle of the order. Dave Wallace, the sixth pick of the 2006 draft, took the ball every fifth day and kept taking it for eleven years.

None of them were famous. Collectively they were about to be very good.

III

The Hundred-Win Years

2011 – 2017

In 2011 the Mobsters won a hundred games, and they did it again in 2012, and in 2013 they won a hundred and five.

The 2011 club finished second in its division and went out and won three postseason rounds anyway. Jim Harris was named most valuable player of the first, Neil Leighton of the second, Brandon Lutt of the third, and Milwaukee walked into the Big League Championship Series against the Denver Dynamite and lost. It was the franchise's first appearance in a final and it did not feel, at the time, like a ceiling. It felt like an introduction.

The 2012 club was better on paper and worse in October. Doug Morris, a twenty-second-round pick, six hundred and sixteenth overall, taken by the Atlanta Smashers seven years earlier and acquired by a club that saw something nobody else had, went 23-9 with an earned run average of 2.68 and was named Cy Young Award winner of the Fire Conference. The Mobsters won a hundred games behind him and lost in the first round.

The Year It All Landed: 2013

The 2013 Milwaukee Mobsters won a hundred and five games and the division, the first flag in the franchise's thirteen-year history, and then they won everything else.

Jim Harris hit .319 with two hundred and fourteen hits, a hundred and twenty-five runs and eighty-two stolen bases, and was named Most Valuable Player of the Fire Conference. He was a first baseman who had hit two home runs all year. He was also, by the arithmetic the league keeps, worth seven and a half wins by himself, and there has never been another season quite like it in this uniform. Jose Hernandez hit .309 and drove in eighty-three. Doug Morris went 16-11 with a 2.55 earned run average. Dave Wallace and Matt Florence held the back of the rotation.

In October they beat their divisional opponent with Harris taking the round, beat their conference opponent with Morgan Fickett taking his, and met the Washington Generals, now the Baltimore Blue Crabs, in the Big League Championship Series. Doug Morris was named the most valuable player of the final.

Three and a half million people came through the gates that year, which was a franchise record, and it was broken the following summer.

The two years after the title were the strangest kind of good. In 2014 the Mobsters won ninety-one games, finished third, and ran all the way back to the final, where the New Orleans Mudcats stopped them. In 2015 they won eighty-nine, took a wild card, won a round, and went out. Five straight Octobers, three final-round appearances in five years, one trophy.

Then the current went slack. Eighty-two wins in 2016 and no October. Eighty-eight in 2017 and a run that ended, again, against New Orleans in the final, with David Ramirez winning the most valuable player award in three consecutive rounds along the way, which no other Mobster has ever done.

That was the last good day for eight years.

IV

Dark

2018 – 2025

Seventy-three wins in 2018. Sixty-two in 2019, which is the worst season this franchise has ever played. Sixty-seven in 2020. Sixty-seven in 2021. Three consecutive last-place finishes, the only three in club history, and eight consecutive seasons without a postseason berth, which is also a franchise record and one nobody wanted.

Attendance fell from three million to two and a quarter. Bob M, who had run the club since 2004 and built both the hundred-win teams and the champion, was gone after 2019. David B held the chair for two seasons. Ryan O took it in 2022 and has held it since.

There was not much to watch. Jai Hackworth won a Gold Glove in 2021 and Oscar Gomez in 2023 and Jose Saucedo in 2024, and Josh Juarez played shortstop for six years and hit .224, and Rob Tite made two hundred starts across two separate stints and finished under .500. The 2023 club got to 81-81 and it counted as news.

But something was going on underneath, and it is worth naming because it is the only part of the dark years that mattered. In 2020 the club used an eighth-round pick, two hundred and fifty-third overall, on a shortstop in the Denver system named Karl Perkins. The year after, a seventh-round pick, two hundred and twenty-third overall, on a catcher named Paul Stepp. Both would eventually come to Milwaukee. In 2027 a second baseman named Jesus Espinosa arrived and hit .281 with twenty-three home runs and was named Rookie of the Year of the Fire Conference.

The Mobsters won seventy-seven games that season. It was the last time they would finish below .500.

The Second Family

2026 – 2031

The turn came in pieces, the way these things do.

Eighty-five wins and a wild card in 2026, the first October in eight years, with Enrique Novoa taking the honors in a round the Mobsters won before going out. A step back to seventy-seven in 2027, which turned out to be the year everything arrived at once. Eighty-eight wins in 2028 and second place, with Stepp and Perkins both winning Silver Sluggers. Ninety-three wins and the division in 2029, with Stepp, Perkins and Espinosa all winning Silver Sluggers on the same club, Moises Aguilar and Mario Melendez winning Gold Gloves, and Danny Hernandez taking a round in October.

And then 2030.

The Second Time: 2030

A hundred wins, the division, and a championship. Espinosa hit .292 with twenty-nine home runs and ninety runs batted in and won another Silver Slugger. Aguilar hit twenty-nine of his own. Perkins and Stepp gave the club the rarest thing in baseball, a shortstop and a catcher who both hit. Juan Samayoa, Joe Case and Dusty Wasson carried a rotation with no star in it, and Chris Calvert closed with an earned run average of 2.54.

In October the Mobsters won four rounds. Karl Perkins took the first. Trevor Faria took the second. Danny Guzman took the third. And in the Big League Championship Series against the Somerville Moneyline, the most valuable player was Ramiro Ortiz.

Somerville is the club that has been to October more often than any franchise in The Big League and has never won it. Milwaukee, with fourteen berths to Somerville's twenty-six, has two banners. There is no justice in that and this history is not going to pretend otherwise.

In 2031 the Mobsters won eighty-four and finished third and made October again, the fourth straight year. Jesus Espinosa hit .295 with twenty-seven home runs and was worth eight wins, the best season any position player has had in this uniform since Jim Harris in 2013. He is twenty-six. Perkins is still here. Stepp is still here. Willie Cuevas won a Gold Glove in center.

The business is open.

What the Ledger Cannot Say

Thirty-one seasons, two thousand five hundred and sixty-seven wins against two thousand four hundred and fifty-six losses, which is .511 and is the plainest possible description of a club that has spent its whole life a little bit better than average and has twice, briefly, been the best there was.

There is no Hall of Fame plaque in Milwaukee. Not one. Jose Hernandez played eleven years here and hit .302 and stole five hundred and thirty-one bases and has never been elected. Jim Harris was the most valuable player in his conference and has never been elected. Jon Flohr threw nearly two thousand innings in this uniform. Dave Wallace threw eighteen hundred more. The only man in the Hall with any Milwaukee on his record at all is Jamie Faunce, who played a hundred and two games here out of a career of more than two thousand and made his name in New Orleans.

That is the cost of the quiet business. Nobody notices while it is happening, and the men who did it do not get statues.

They do have the two banners, and they have them from opposite ends of three decades, built by different general managers out of different players in a league that had turned over twice in between. Whatever this organization knows how to do, it did not forget it during the eight dark years. It just stopped doing it for a while.

The Ledger

Franchise founded: 2001 (charter member, The Big League, as the Indianapolis Predators)

Relocations: 2007, Indianapolis to Milwaukee

Home: Mobsters Park, Milwaukee — capacity 45,000

Conference: Fire Conference, Topaz Division

All-time regular-season record (2001–2031): 2,567–2,456 (.511)

Postseason appearances: 14 in 31 seasons

League Championships: 2 — 2013 (over the Washington Generals, now Baltimore), 2030 (over Somerville)

Championship series appearances: 5 — 2011 (lost to the Denver Dynamite), 2013 (won over the Washington Generals, now Baltimore Blue Crabs), 2014 (lost to the New Orleans Mudcats), 2017 (lost to the New Orleans Mudcats), 2030 (won over the Somerville Moneyline)

Division titles: 3 — 2013, 2029, 2030

Best season: 2013 (105–57)

Worst season: 2019 (62–100)

Most Valuable Players: 1 — Jim Harris (2013)

Cy Young Awards: 1 — Doug Morris (2012)

Rookies of the Year: 3 — Paddy Cloherty (2001, Fire Conference), Toshitada Nishioka (2003, Fire Conference), Jesus Espinosa (2027, Fire Conference)

Hall of Famers: none of its own. Jamie Faunce, inducted in 2030, played 102 games in Milwaukee out of a career of more than two thousand, and Marcello Bland appeared in three

General managers: Herb D (2001–2003), Bob M (2004–2019), David B (2020–2021), Ryan O (2022–)

Hundred-win seasons: 4 — 2011, 2012, 2013, 2030

Longest postseason drought: 8 seasons (2018–2025)

Consecutive Octobers: 5 (2011–2015)

Best attendance: 3,574,326 (2014)

Pillars of the Franchise

Jose Hernandez, 3B (2007–2017) — The best position player the franchise has developed. Fourth overall in the 2004 draft, eleven seasons in this uniform, 1,529 games, a .302 average, 1,814 hits, 697 runs batted in and 531 stolen bases. His 2015, when he hit .353, is the highest average any Mobster has posted over a full season. He was on both hundred-win clubs and the 2013 champion.

Jim Harris, 1B (2008–2016) — Most Valuable Player of the Fire Conference in 2013, on the strength of a .319 average, 214 hits, 125 runs and 82 stolen bases from a first baseman who hit two home runs all year. Nine seasons, all of them here, 1,230 games, 541 stolen bases, and round MVP honors in four separate Octobers. A third-round pick, 73rd overall.

Jon Flohr, SP (2001–2010) — The original. A second-round pick, 55th overall, who made 303 starts in Indianapolis and Milwaukee, threw 1,971 innings, struck out 2,079, and left with a record of 128-113 and a 3.62 earned run average on clubs that were mostly not good. No pitcher in franchise history has thrown as much.

Dave Wallace, SP (2007–2017) — Sixth overall in 2006, eleven seasons, 287 starts, 123-80, a 3.68 earned run average, and a place in the rotation for the wild card of 2007, the hundred-win clubs of 2011 and 2012, and the championship of 2013. He never pitched for anyone else.

Doug Morris, SP (2011–2016) — Cy Young Award winner of the Fire Conference in 2012 at 23-9 with a 2.68 earned run average, and Most Valuable Player of the 2013 Big League Championship Series. Six seasons in Milwaukee, 86-46, a 3.28 earned run average. He had been the 616th player taken in the 2006 draft, in the twenty-second round, by the Atlanta Smashers.

Jesus Espinosa, 2B (2027–2031) — Rookie of the Year of the Fire Conference in 2027 and the best player on the second champion. Four Silver Sluggers in five seasons, a .291 average, 107 home runs in 756 games, and an eight-win season in 2031 at twenty-six. Still here.

Karl Perkins, SS (2025–2031) — An eighth-round pick, 253rd overall, out of the Denver system, and the shortstop on the 2030 champion. Seven seasons, 868 games, 128 home runs, two Silver Sluggers, and the most valuable player award in the first round of the 2030 postseason.

Paul Stepp, C (2028–2031) — Three Silver Sluggers in four seasons from behind the plate, 84 home runs and 300 runs batted in across 525 games. A seventh-round pick, 223rd overall, in 2021.

Paddy Cloherty, RF (2001–2005) — The first Predator worth the ticket. Rookie of the Year of the Fire Conference in 2001, five seasons, 792 games, a .278 average and 134 home runs on clubs that never finished above fourth.

Neil Leighton, C (2007–2014) — Eight seasons and 992 games behind the plate for the first good teams this franchise ever had, a .279 average, 503 runs batted in, a Gold Glove in 2011 and the round MVP award in the run to the 2011 final.

Tony Aponte, 1B (2006–2012) — Seven seasons, 972 games, a .286 average and 481 stolen bases, and the most valuable player of a 2008 postseason round. He had come up with the Kingston Frontenacs.

Josh Broyles, RP (2010–2018) — The bullpen of the hundred-win years. Nine seasons, 440 appearances, 224 saves and a 2.67 earned run average.

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