



THE MYRTLE BEACH MERMEN

A Franchise History of The Big League — 2001 to 2031

Twenty-nine summers of heat in Texas. One November on top. Then the water.

In the style of Geoffrey C. Ward

PROLOGUE

Heat and Water

A pepper does not announce itself. That is the whole nature of the thing. You take the first bite and find it pleasant, almost mild, and you take a second, and somewhere in the third or fourth the heat arrives, having been building the entire time in a place you could not see, and then it will not leave.

For twenty-nine years this franchise played in San Antonio and called itself the Chiles Picantes, and if the league had wanted a name that described what it was actually watching, it could not have chosen better. The Chiles were rarely the best team in The Big League. In thirty-one seasons they finished first in their division four times. They were, instead, the team that was always there, season after season, eighty-eight wins and ninety-one wins and ninety-three wins, filing into October through the wild card door with the look of people who had done this before and expected to do it again.

Eighteen times they reached the postseason. Seventeen times they went home without the trophy.

And then, in the autumn of 2024, in the twenty-fourth summer of the franchise, the heat finally arrived, and San Antonio won a championship. Five years later the club left Texas for the South Carolina coast, took the name Mermen, and has not had a winning season since.

This is the story of a slow burn, and of what happened when it was finally put in the water.

I

Hot From the First Pitch

2001 – 2003

The Chiles Picantes were not one of the charter clubs that needed a decade to find itself. They were good immediately, and they were good in a way that suggested somebody in the front office had a plan.

Aaron S, the franchise's first general manager, built around two men who would remain the two largest figures in club history. Norm Soto was a right fielder with a swing built for the middle of an order, and he hit thirty-three home runs in the inaugural season and drove in a hundred. Terence Mason was a starting pitcher, twenty-three years old, and he won fourteen games that first year and would go on to throw more innings in these colors than any man before or since.

San Antonio won eighty-nine games in 2001 and reached the postseason. Virginia put them out in the opening round in four. In 2002 they won ninety-two, beat Nashville, swept Virginia, and lost the conference final to Oahu in seven games, the first of many seven-game evenings this franchise would spend on the wrong end of a scoreboard.

Then came 2003, and the closest thing to a coronation the club would know for two decades. Eighty-eight wins, three postseason series won, and San Antonio in the championship series in its third year of existence.

Atlanta swept them. Four games, none of them close enough to remember warmly. Edwin Melchor and Arturo Revolorio and Mike Feters had each been named most valuable player of a round on the way there, and none of it mattered by the end of the week.

It would be twenty-one years before the Chiles Picantes played for a championship again.

II

What It Cost

2004 – 2008

What follows a young club's run to the final is almost always a bill, and San Antonio paid it in full.

Aaron S left after the 2004 season, a year in which the club fell to sixty-nine wins even as Terence Mason produced the finest summer any Chiles pitcher would ever produce: eighteen wins against five losses, a 2.14 earned run average, two hundred and seventy-nine strikeouts, and the Fire Conference Cy Young Award. It is one of the peculiar cruelties of the game that a pitcher's best season and his team's collapse can arrive on the same calendar. Mason took the ball every fifth day for a club going nowhere and was better than he had ever been.

His successor, Bobby H, lasted a single season, and it was the worst in franchise history: 62-100. Mason went 7-15 that summer with an earned run average under four.

Kay K took over in 2006 and steadied the thing without ever quite lifting it. Seventy-nine wins, then seventy-two, then eighty-two. No Octobers. What those years produced instead was Norm Soto at the height of his powers, forty-nine home runs in 2007 and forty-eight in 2008, with 132 and a hundred and thirty-four runs batted in, back-to-back Silver Slugger seasons in a ballpark nobody outside Texas had reason to watch.

The Man Who Pitched Through It

Terence Mason spent fourteen seasons in this uniform and threw 3,123 innings in it. He won a hundred and ninety-eight games and lost 148, and the losses are the more honest number, because they measure how often he was excellent for a team that was not.

He won the Fire Conference Cy Young in 2004, on a sixty-nine-win club. He won it again in 2010, at thirty-two, with twenty wins and two hundred and seventy-one innings, and took a Gold Glove the same year. In between he made at least thirty starts a season without complaint or interruption, and in 2009 he was named most valuable player of the opening round, which was the only postseason hardware he ever collected.

He left for New Orleans in 2015, pitched one indifferent season, and retired. He is in the Hall of Fame. So is Norm Soto, who played all 1,377 of his major-league games for this franchise and remains its all-time leader in hits, home runs, runs and runs batted in, twenty-one years after his last at-bat.

Two Hall of Famers, ten seasons together, and one postseason series won between them.

III

Good, and Not Enough

2009 – 2016

The Chiles came back to October in 2009 with eighty-five wins, beat Milwaukee in the opening round on the strength of Mason's arm, and were swept out by Huron. In 2011 they won ninety-one and took the Ruby Division, the first division flag in franchise history, and lost in four to Milwaukee. In 2012 and 2013 they got in and went out in the first round, to Big Horn and to Virginia.

That is the whole shape of the era: a good club, an early exit, a winter of small adjustments, and the same result the following autumn.

Kay K gave way to Daryl G in 2013, and the new general manager inherited a roster with David Brobeck hitting .318 in the middle of it and very little behind him. In 2014 the bottom went out again, 65-97, the second-worst season the franchise has recorded. Two more losing years followed.

Those three summers were the last time this club was bad in Texas, and they were, in retrospect, the price of what came next.

IV

Daryl's Wall

2017 – 2023

From 2017 through 2023 the Chiles Picantes reached the postseason six times in seven years and won at least eighty-two games every single season. They won ninety-seven in 2020 and took the division. They won ninety-six in 2022 and took it again. They won ninety-three in 2019 and finished third, which tells you what the Ruby Division was in those years.

Three times in that stretch they reached the conference championship series. Three times they were beaten there, and never by less than four games to none. Huron did it in 2018. Huron did it again in 2019. Big Horn did it in 2022.

Twelve straight postseason games in the round before the final, and San Antonio lost all twelve.

The talent was not in question. Tomas Tapia hit a hundred and seventy-two home runs in six seasons and won Silver Sluggers in 2018 and 2022. Allen Beyer came up in 2020, won Rookie of the Year of the Fire Conference, and took four Silver Sluggers in five years as a catcher. Danny Estrada, Carlos Valencia, Jamie Faunce, who would be voted into the Hall of Fame on his first ballot in 2030, all passed through the middle of those orders. Danny Guzman won Rookie of the Year in 2022 and was named most valuable player of a round that same October. Robby Bailey did the same in 2023.

What San Antonio did not have, in any of those seasons, was a week in which everything held.

V

The Autumn It Finally Came (2024)

The 2024 Chiles Picantes won ninety-eight games and finished second. Big Horn won a hundred and two and took the Ruby Division for the third time in five years, and San Antonio, as it had done a dozen times before, went into October through the side entrance.

They beat Huron four games to one, which settled a six-year-old debt. They beat Kansas City in seven. They beat Oahu in seven, the conference final that had beaten them three times running, and this time it was San Antonio taking the seventh game.

Then Denver in the championship series, and the Chiles won it four games to one.

The most valuable player of that final was a starting pitcher named Josh Michael, who had spent parts of five seasons being not quite enough for Toronto, had thrown nineteen innings for Denver the year before, and had come to San Antonio and gone 12-7 with a 3.22 earned run average. He beat the club that had employed him twelve months earlier, and it was the best week of his professional life.

Allen Beyer was named most valuable player of the conference round. Danny Guzman took the division round. Joe Aarestad took the first. Itsuto Kuroiwa, a rookie outfielder who would eventually steal four hundred and forty-nine bases in these colors, was Rookie of the Year.

Twenty-four summers. Eighteen postseason berths. One trophy.

The Chiles Picantes were not the best team in The Big League in 2024, and they had not been the best team in The Big League in any of the twenty-three years before it. They were, for three weeks in the autumn, good enough, which is the only thing the game has ever actually asked.

VI

The Last Summers in Texas

2025 – 2029

They did not fall off. That is what makes the ending strange.

Ninety-one wins in 2025 and an opening-round loss in seven to St. Louis. Ninety-one again in 2026, another division flag, and the first and only Most Valuable Player award in franchise history, the Fire Conference's: Bob Donaldson, a second baseman who hit .257 with twenty-two home runs and fifty-nine stolen bases and won a Gold Glove and a Silver Slugger the same year. Oklahoma City put them out in the second round.

In 2027 they won ninety-three and went all the way back to the championship series, twenty-four years after the first one, and Rochester beat them four games to one. Jose Marulanda was named most valuable player of two separate rounds on the way there. Ted Ketron and Josh Stroud won Silver Sluggers that season.

Eighty-six wins in 2028 and a first-round loss to Huron. Seventy-nine in 2029, and no October at all.

Attendance in San Antonio in 2028 was 3.3 million. The Chiles Picantes had drawn better than three million in each of the previous nine seasons. Whatever the reasons for what happened next, an empty ballpark was not among them.

After the 2029 season, the franchise left Texas.

Salt Water

2030 – 2031

They went to Myrtle Beach and became the Mermen, and the pepper became a creature of the sea.

The two seasons since have been the worst back-to-back years in franchise history outside the 2004-2005 collapse: 70-92, then 67-95, seventh in the Ruby Division both times. Marulanda was gone after 2029. Matt Burke, who had gone 71-42 over six seasons, was gone with him. Ted Ketron played one year on the coast and left. The 2031 club's best hitter was Rodolfo Pintasilgo and its best pitcher was Robby Ayala, and neither name would have made the roster of the 2024 champions.

Daryl G is still the general manager. He has now run this franchise for nineteen seasons, longer than its other three general managers put together, and his record is 1,613-1,465 with twelve postseason berths and the only championship the club has ever won. He is also the man holding it as it goes down.

Attendance on the coast has been 2.37 million and 2.53 million, respectable numbers for a team losing ninety-five games, and the fan interest ratings have not moved. Myrtle Beach appears willing to wait.

The Ledger

Franchise founded: 2001 (charter member, The Big League), as the San Antonio Chiles Picantes

Relocations: 2030, to Myrtle Beach, as the Mermen

Home: Mermen Park, Myrtle Beach — capacity 45,000

Conference: Fire Conference, Ruby Division

All-time regular-season record (2001–2031): 2,592–2,431 (.516)

Postseason appearances: 18 in 31 seasons (last: 2028)

League Championships: 1 (2024, over Denver, 4–1)

Championship series appearances: 3 — 2003 (lost to the Atlanta Smashers, now Cincinnati Regents), 2024 (won over the Denver Dynamite), 2027 (lost to the Rochester North Stars)

Division titles: 4 (2011, 2020, 2022, 2026)

Best season: 2024 (98–64)

Worst season: 2005 (62–100)

Most Valuable Players: 1 — Bob Donaldson (2026)

Cy Young Awards: 2, both to Terence Mason (2004, 2010)

Rookies of the Year: 6 — Matt Domagala (2013), Allen Beyer (2020), Danny Guzman (2022), Robby Bailey (2023), Itsuto Kuroiwa (2024), Ernie Huth (2025)

Hall of Famers: 2 who belong to this franchise — Norm Soto and Terence Mason. Jamie Faunce, elected in 2030, played 473 games in these colors; Aaron Horsfall and Pat Pharo passed through.

General managers: Aaron S (2001–2004), Bobby H (2005), Kay K (2006–2012), Daryl G (2013–present)

Pillars of the Franchise

Terence Mason, RHP (2001–2014) — Hall of Famer and the largest figure in club history. 198–148 with a 3.29 earned run average, 3,123 innings and 2,920 strikeouts, all franchise records by a distance nobody is going to close. Two Fire Conference Cy Young Awards (2004, 2010) and a Gold Glove. Never pitched in a championship series.

Norm Soto, RF (2001–2010) — Hall of Famer; played every one of his 1,377 major-league games here. Franchise leader in hits (1,445), home runs (350), runs (849) and runs batted in (979). Three straight Silver Sluggers (2007–2009), with 49 and 48 home runs in the middle of them.

David Brobeck, OF (2008–2015) — The most reliable bat of the lean years. .318 across eight seasons, 1,296 hits, a Silver Slugger in 2013.

Tomas Tapia, OF (2018–2023) — 172 home runs and 621 runs batted in in six seasons, two Silver Sluggers, and most valuable player of a postseason round in both 2018 and 2019.

Allen Beyer, C (2020–2024) — Rookie of the Year in 2020 and four Silver Sluggers in five seasons. Named most valuable player of the 2024 conference championship series, the club's most important October week.

Bob Donaldson, 2B (2025–2028) — The only Most Valuable Player in franchise history. In 2026 he hit .257 with twenty-two home runs and fifty-nine stolen bases, won a Gold Glove and a Silver Slugger, and carried a division winner.

Itsuto Kuroiwa, OF (2024–2028) — Rookie of the Year on the championship club and the franchise's all-time leader with 449 stolen bases.

The 2024 champions: Josh Michael, most valuable player of the championship series; Danny Guzman and Joe Aarestad, most valuable players of the rounds before it; Matt Burke, 71–42 across six seasons and the steadiest arm of the era.

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