



THE OKLAHOMA CITY OUTLAWS

A Franchise History of The Big League — 2001 to 2031

Twenty-two Octobers. Seven flags. No final. The horizon never closes.

In the style of Geoffrey C. Ward

PROLOGUE

The Distance You Can See

On the southern plains a man can stand on level ground and see fifty miles, and the thing about seeing fifty miles is that the fifty miles never close. The horizon is not a place. It is a property of the eye. You walk toward it all day in good weather with a good horse and at sundown it is exactly where it was at dawn, and this is not a failure of the walking.

In thirty-one seasons the Outlaws have won two thousand seven hundred and thirty-two games, more than they have lost by four hundred and forty-two, which is the kind of sustained excellence most franchises in The Big League have never approached. They have been to October twenty-two times. They have won seven division flags. Five times a man in this uniform has been named the most valuable player in his conference. A sixth has won the Cy Young Award.

They have never played in a Big League Championship Series.

Not lost one. Never played in one. Twenty-two Octobers and the club has never once been among the last two teams standing, which is a thing so improbable that it has to be looked at directly rather than explained away. Four times they got to within a single series of it, in 2001 and 2012 and 2014 and 2026, and four times the door shut.

This is a history of a very good baseball team, told honestly, which means it is a history of the horizon.

I

Kingston

2001 – 2011

They began on a lake, not a plain. The Kingston Frontenacs were a charter member of The Big League, named for the old fort town at the head of the St. Lawrence, and they were good immediately and stayed good for a decade.

Ninety-seven wins and the division in 2001, the first season the league ever played. Tyler English won a Silver Slugger and was named most valuable player of the divisional round in October, and then Kingston lost the conference championship series, one win from the final, and nobody thought much of it at the time because they were plainly going to be back.

They were. A hundred and one wins in 2003 and a second flag. Ninety in 2004 and a third. Ninety-eight in 2005. A hundred in 2006. Ninety-five and a flag in 2007. A hundred again in 2008. Six consecutive postseason berths from 2003 through 2008 and four division titles in eight years, and in all of it not one conference championship. The 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007 and 2008 clubs went a combined five hundred and eighty-four and three hundred and eighty-eight and won, between them, not one postseason round.

The talent was not the problem. Ricardo Box arrived in 2005 and in 2006 hit .387 with two hundred and thirty-four hits, twenty-two home runs, a hundred and twenty-two runs and seventy-six stolen bases, and was named Most Valuable Player of the Fire Conference. It is the best single season any man has played for this franchise and one of the best anyone has played for any of them. Box was in Kingston for two years. He went into the Hall of Fame in 2009 in another club's cap.

Rich Gordon came the same year Box did and stayed five. In 2008 he hit .293 with forty-eight home runs, a hundred and twenty-three runs batted in and a hundred and thirty-two runs scored and won the conference's Most Valuable Player award, and he is, to this day, the only man who spent the bulk of his career in this uniform and has a plaque in the Hall of Fame.

There was also Zach Koster, who was named Rookie of the Year of the Fire Conference in 2005 and who did something in Kingston that nobody in this league has done since. In 2006 he hit .300 with thirty-one home runs and ninety-one runs batted in, and went 16-6 with an earned run average of 2.94. In the same season. He played four years here, hit .304 as a batter and went 37-22 as a pitcher, and then he was gone.

Around them: Dennis Lembcke, third overall in the very first draft, who hit two hundred and sixty-nine home runs here. Jamal Kimbrough in center field, who won five Gold Gloves. Joe Smith, a second-round pick, fifty-fourth overall, who came up in 2006 and hit .336. Adrian Lehman, a fourth-round pick who would eventually make three hundred and fifty starts for the franchise across two stints. Shane Markward closing, on his way to a Hall of Fame election of his own in 2029, though he would earn most of it elsewhere.

Jehkob K ran the club for those first ten years. In 2011 the Frontenacs slipped to seventy-nine wins, Travis T took over, and the following spring the franchise moved to Oklahoma City.

Nine Straight

2012 – 2020

The move did not interrupt anything. It accelerated it.

The Outlaws went to October in 2012, and in 2013, and in every season through 2020. Nine consecutive postseason berths, the longest run this franchise has ever had. Eighty-nine wins, then ninety-five, then ninety-eight, then a hundred and two, then ninety-seven, then ninety-two, then eighty-six, then eighty-eight, then eighty-five.

The 2015 club won a hundred and two games, which is still the franchise record, and lost in the first round.

Three times in that stretch the Outlaws got past the opening weekend. In 2012 they won two rounds, Jin Ning taking the first and Ricky Quinones the second, and lost the conference championship series. In 2014 they won two more, Justin Marshall and Jon Sanders taking them, and lost the conference championship series. Those are the second and third of the four times this franchise has stood one series from a championship appearance.

The men were extraordinary. Joe Smith played center field for twelve seasons and hit .308 with two thousand three hundred and four hits and five hundred and twenty-two stolen bases, and won six Silver Sluggers, and was never once named the most valuable player of anything. Victor Esquivel hit two hundred and twenty-nine home runs at third. Antonio Soriano, the fourth pick of the 2008 draft, played shortstop for eight years. William Zoll, taken in the eleventh round with the three hundred and thirty-third selection, caught more than eight hundred games and hit two hundred and three home runs, which is not what an eleventh-round catcher is supposed to do. David Rumler hit .313 with twenty-six home runs in 2017 and was named Rookie of the Year of the Fire Conference, and then hit .250 the following year and was never the same.

And in 2013 Je-ju Kim went 17-6 with an earned run average of 2.18 and won the Cy Young Award of the Fire Conference. The Outlaws won ninety-five games behind him and lost in the divisional round.

III

The Only Bad Years

2021 – 2024

Then, for the only time in franchise history, the club fell apart.

Seventy-one wins in 2021. Seventy-eight in 2022. Sixty-three in 2023, which is the worst season the Outlaws have played. Sixty-eight in 2024, and a seventh-place finish, and then an eighth. Four consecutive Octobers missed, which remains the longest drought this organization has ever endured and is shorter than the drought a dozen clubs in this league consider ordinary.

That last sentence is the whole franchise in miniature. Oklahoma City's worst stretch would have been an ordinary one almost anywhere else. Memphis has finished under .500 in twenty-six of its thirty-one seasons. The Montreal Machine once missed October twenty years running. The Outlaws missed four in a row and treated it as a catastrophe, which in this organization it was.

Brandon T held the general manager's chair through 2021 and Rees S took it in 2022 and holds it still.

The strange thing about those four years is that the best player in the league was on the roster for all of them.

IV

Marlin

Brian Marlin was a fourth-round pick, the hundred and twenty-second man taken in the 2014 draft, and he came up in 2018 and hit .297.

In 2019 he hit .313 with thirty-five home runs. In 2020, .301 with thirty-six. In 2021 he hit .319 with forty-three home runs and was named Most Valuable Player of the Fire Conference, on a club that lost ninety-one games and finished seventh. In 2022 he hit .331 with forty-one home runs and a hundred and twenty-eight runs batted in and won it again, on a club that finished fifth.

Two conference Most Valuable Player awards in consecutive seasons, both of them earned on losing teams. In 2023 he hit .332 in a hundred and seventeen games while the Outlaws lost ninety-nine.

He finished with ten seasons in this uniform, two hundred and eighty-one home runs, nine hundred and eleven runs batted in and a .292 average, and he was the reason to buy a ticket in Oklahoma City during the only stretch when there was no other reason. He is not in the Hall of Fame.

V

Back to the Horizon

2025 – 2031

Eighty-eight wins in 2025 and a wild card. Ninety-two in 2026, and a run: Brian Gore took the first round, Alex Villarreal the second, and the Outlaws lost the conference championship series for the fourth time in franchise history and for the fourth time did not reach the final. Eighty-seven in 2027, and October again, and out.

Joel Smith won the conference's Most Valuable Player award in 2027 in a season he split between Vancouver and Oklahoma City, arriving in the second half. It is the fifth such award in franchise history and the only one that did not belong entirely to this club.

Then two down years, seventy-nine wins and then seventy-five, with Adam Bickler winning a Gold Glove in the first of them. The second produced **David Ramirez**, a second baseman named Rookie of the Year of the Fire Conference in 2029, who by 2031 was hitting .310 and stealing thirty-four bases.

Eighty-seven wins and another October in 2030, and out again.

And then 2031. The Outlaws won a hundred games and the division, the seventh flag in franchise history and the first since 2016, and the most games the club had won since 2015. Scott Schoenike, Manny Jimenez and Jeremy Porten all took Silver Sluggers. Jimenez won a Gold Glove and the opening round with it. Robby Morales, the twenty-third pick of the 2018 draft, anchored the rotation. For most of that summer it looked like the year the walking finally arrived somewhere.

Then they lost, and the season ended, and the horizon was where it had been.

VI

Twenty-Two Octobers

Two thousand seven hundred and thirty-two wins. Twenty-two postseason appearances in thirty-one years, which is more than two-thirds of the seasons this franchise has played. Seven division titles. Five conference Most Valuable Player awards and a Cy Young. Four hundred and forty-two games above .500 across three decades.

And a trophy case with seven flags in it and nothing else.

There is an argument, made in every clubhouse in every sport, that the postseason is a lottery and that the only honest measure of a baseball team is the hundred and sixty-two. By that measure the Outlaws are

among the finest organizations The Big League has ever had, and it is not close, and any accounting that leaves that out is dishonest.

There is also the fact that they have never played a game in the last week of any season.

Both things are true. The plains do that to you. You can see everything from here, in every direction, farther than you can see from anywhere else in the country, and what you see is how far away it is.

The Ledger

Franchise founded: 2001 (charter member, The Big League, as the Kingston Frontenacs)

Relocations: 2012, Kingston to Oklahoma City

Home: Oklahoma Field, Oklahoma City — capacity 45,000

Conference: Fire Conference, Topaz Division

All-time regular-season record (2001–2031): 2,732–2,290 (.544)

Postseason appearances: 22 in 31 seasons

League Championships: 0

Championship series appearances: 0 — the club has reached the conference championship series four times (2001, 2012, 2014, 2026) and lost all four

Division titles: 7 — 2001, 2003, 2004, 2007, 2008, 2016, 2031

Best season: 2015 (102–60)

Worst season: 2023 (63–99)

Most Valuable Players: 5 awards, 4 men — Ricardo Box (2006), Rich Gordon (2008), Brian Marlin (2021, 2022), Joel Smith (2027)

Cy Young Awards: 1 — Je-ju Kim (2013)

Rookies of the Year: 3 — Zach Koster (2005, Fire Conference), David Rumler (2017, Fire Conference), David Ramirez (2029, Fire Conference)

Hall of Famers: 1 of its own, Rich Gordon (inducted 2015), who played five of his eleven seasons here. Two more passed through: Ricardo Box (inducted 2009) spent two seasons in Kingston out of a career of fewer than nine hundred games, and Shane Markward (inducted 2029) five, out of a career of just under a thousand games

General managers: Jehkob K (2001–2010), Travis T (2011–2018), Brandon T (2019–2021), Rees S (2022–)

Hundred-win seasons: 5 — 2003, 2006, 2008, 2015, 2031

Longest postseason drought: 4 seasons (2021–2024)

Consecutive Octobers: 9 (2012–2020)

Best attendance: 3,604,263 (2015)

Pillars of the Franchise

Brian Marlin, RF (2018–2027) — Most Valuable Player of the Fire Conference in 2021 and again in 2022, both times on a losing club. Ten seasons, 1,437 games, a .292 average, 1,627 hits, 281 home runs and 911 runs batted in, and six Silver Sluggers. A fourth-round pick, 122nd overall, in 2014.

Joe Smith, CF (2006–2017) — Twelve seasons, all of them here, 1,761 games, a .308 average, 2,304 hits and 522 stolen bases. Six Silver Sluggers and a Gold Glove, and not one Most Valuable Player award. A second-round pick, 54th overall, in 2002. No man has played more games for this franchise.

Dennis Lembcke, LF (2002–2010) — Third overall in the first draft the league ever held. Nine seasons in Kingston, 1,298 games, a .289 average, 269 home runs and 889 runs batted in, and three Silver Sluggers on the great Frontenac clubs of the middle 2000s.

Rich Gordon, 2B (2005–2009) — The franchise's only Hall of Famer. Most Valuable Player of the Fire Conference in 2008 at .293 with 48 home runs, 123 runs batted in and 132 runs scored. Five seasons here, 679 games, 154 home runs and 162 stolen bases from second base. Inducted in 2015.

Adrian Lehman, SP (2002–2011, 2014, 2017–2018) — Two stints and 350 starts, more than any pitcher in franchise history, 2,176 innings, 1,814 strikeouts and a record of 140-120 on clubs that ranged from a hundred wins to sixty-three. A fourth-round pick, 110th overall.

Je-ju Kim, SP (2010–2017) — Cy Young Award winner of the Fire Conference in 2013 at 17-6 with a 2.18 earned run average. Eight seasons, 190 starts, 80-47, a 3.20 earned run average. A second-round pick, 31st overall.

Victor Esquivel, 3B (2011–2019) — Nine seasons, 1,162 games, a .287 average and 229 home runs, and the most valuable player of the opening round of the 2013 postseason. He had been the third pick of the 2005 draft by the Boston Boom.

William Zoll, C (2015–2023) — An eleventh-round pick, 333rd overall, who caught 864 games in this uniform and hit 203 home runs, with Silver Sluggers in 2016 and 2017.

Antonio Soriano, SS (2013–2020) — Fourth overall in 2008. Eight seasons at shortstop, 1,256 games, 297 stolen bases and a Gold Glove in 2015 on the hundred-and-two-win club.

Jamal Kimbrough, CF (2001–2008) — Five Gold Gloves in eight seasons in center field for the original Frontenacs, 1,065 games and 160 stolen bases. A second-round pick, 51st overall.

Ricardo Box, RF (2005–2006) — Two seasons, and one of them is the best any hitter has given this franchise: .387 with 234 hits, 122 runs and 76 stolen bases in 2006, and the Most Valuable Player award of the Fire Conference. He hit .342 across his time in Kingston. Elected to the Hall of Fame in 2009, primarily for his years with the Boston Boom.

Shane Markward, RP (2007–2011) — Five seasons in the Kingston bullpen, 305 appearances, 185 saves and a 2.71 earned run average. Elected to the Hall of Fame in 2029 on the strength of a career spent mostly with the Griffins.

Zach Koster, 1B (2004–2007) — Rookie of the Year of the Fire Conference in 2005, and the only true two-way player in franchise history. Four seasons in Kingston: 377 games, a .304 average, 91 home runs and 292 runs batted in as a hitter, and 88 starts, 37-22 and a 3.20 earned run average as a pitcher. In 2006 alone he hit .300 with 31 home runs and went 16-6 with a 2.94 earned run average.

Robby Morales, SP (2024–2031) — The ace of the club that won a hundred games in 2031. Eight seasons, 215 starts, 78-59, a 3.38 earned run average. First round, 23rd overall, 2018.

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