



THE PHILADELPHIA EAGLES

A Franchise History of The Big League — 2001 to 2031

The first champions, and twenty-nine years on the fence post.

In the style of Geoffrey C. Ward

PROLOGUE

The First One

Somebody has to be first, and then somebody has to live with having been first.

In the autumn of 2001, in the inaugural season of The Big League, the Philadelphia Eagles won a hundred and four games, took the Sapphire Division, went through October without losing a series, and became the first champions this league ever had. Omar Gonzalez hit sixty home runs and drove in a hundred and forty-five and was named Most Valuable Player of the Ice Conference and then most valuable player of the championship series. Jim Green, a third baseman in his first professional season, hit .296 with thirty-seven home runs and took the honors in the two rounds before it. Three million two hundred thousand people came out to the Aviary.

The next year they won a hundred and five, which is still the most games this franchise has ever won, and lost in October.

They have not won a division since.

That is 2002. It is now 2031. Twenty-nine consecutive seasons without a flag, five Octobers in thirty-one years, and a ballpark that drew three and a half million people in the second year of its life and one million eight hundred thousand in 2027.

The eagle is a bird that can see a rabbit from a mile up and can also sit on a fence post for most of an afternoon. This franchise has done both, and the sitting has taken considerably longer.

I

The Two Best Years

2001 – 2002

They were assembled to win immediately and they did.

Omar Gonzalez played first base and had one of the great seasons anybody has had in this league: .316, sixty home runs, a hundred and forty-five runs batted in, nine wins above replacement, the conference's Most Valuable Player. Jim Green, the seventeenth player taken in the club's first draft, hit thirty-seven home runs and drew ninety-four walks as a rookie. Marcello Bland caught sixty-one games

and hit .324 with twenty-three home runs in them. Frank Boza went nineteen and ten. Franklin Rico went seventeen and eight. John Hill went ten and three with a 2.88.

A hundred and four wins. In October they beat their first opponent with Jim Green named most valuable player of the round, and their second with Green named again, and in the 2001 Big League Championship Series they beat the Phoenix Firebirds, and Omar Gonzalez was the most valuable player of it.

In 2002 they won a hundred and five and finished first again. Green and Bland both won Silver Sluggers. Victor Gonzalez won a Gold Glove. They lost in October, and the record does not say much more than that.

And then the whole thing came apart in about eighteen months. Gonzalez left after 2003 for the Huron organization, where he would spend most of a Hall of Fame career. Bland left after 2004 and finished his in New Orleans, and went into the Hall the same year, 2012. Both of them are in Cooperstown, in a manner of speaking, on the strength of what they did somewhere else.

II

The Long Descent

2003 – 2013

Jim Green stayed, and for three more years he was the best player in the conference and it did not matter.

Eighty wins in 2003, and Green won the Most Valuable Player award, and George Reed — the twentieth pick of the 2001 draft, a right-hander who would finish with two hundred and eight wins and a plaque of his own — won the Cy Young Award of the Ice Conference. Sixty-nine wins in 2004. Eighty-four in 2005, and Green won a second MVP.

Then 2006: fifty-two wins and a hundred and ten losses, the worst season in franchise history, five years after the best one. Fifty-eight in 2007. Sixty-eight. Sixty-two. Sixty-nine.

Green was gone after 2006, and put up the second half of a Hall of Fame career elsewhere; he went into the Hall in 2014 with four hundred and eighteen home runs, two hundred and forty-six of them hit here. Reed was gone after 2007 and went in himself in 2021.

Bobby H took over the front office in 2009 and would hold it for twenty-two seasons.

There were flashes. David Ramirez, the tenth pick of the 2007 draft, came up in 2011, hit .276 with a Silver Slugger and a Gold Glove and was named Rookie of the Year of the Ice Conference, then won

another Silver Slugger in 2012 and was gone by 2016. Elijah Whitlock won a Gold Glove in 2010. Jay MacTavish won one in 2011. The club won seventy-nine games twice and seventy-five and finished no better than fourth.

Eleven consecutive seasons out of October, from 2003 through 2013. It is the longest drought this franchise has known, and it was not the last of that length.

III

Henson

2014 – 2019

And then, for six years, Philadelphia had the best pitcher in the world and got almost nothing out of it.

Nick Henson had been the twelfth pick of the 2008 draft. He threw nine innings in 2012 and went twelve and eight in 2013, and then he did this: fourteen and five with a 2.46; thirteen and four with a 1.67; eighteen and three with a 1.82; twenty and four with a 1.43 and three hundred and seventy-five strikeouts; thirteen and five with a 2.14.

Cy Young Award of the Ice Conference in 2015, and 2016, and 2017, and 2018. Four consecutive, a run only the Kansas City Scouts have matched, and Henson did his four alone. In eight seasons in this uniform he won a hundred games against thirty-four losses with an earned run average of 2.13, and struck out one thousand nine hundred and sixty-nine men in one thousand four hundred and one innings, worth sixty-one and a half wins above replacement. He would go into the Hall of Fame in 2030 with a career mark of 193-82 and very nearly a hundred wins above replacement, and Philadelphia is his club by games played, and the plaque is Philadelphia's.

The clubs he pitched for won ninety-two in 2014, eighty-five, ninety-seven, ninety-three, eighty-two and seventy-seven.

Three Octobers in that stretch: 2014, 2016 and 2017. The 2016 club, at ninety-seven and sixty-six, was the best Philadelphia team since 2002. In October they beat their first opponent with Nyyrikki Hogan named most valuable player of the round, and their second with Alex Flores, and their third with Mark Green, and in the Big League Championship Series they lost to the Oahu Paddlers.

It is the only final this franchise has played since it won the first one. Henson made three hundred and eight strikeouts that season and won the Cy Young and a Gold Glove, and never got that close again, and neither has the club.

IV

The Fence Post

2020 – 2031

Sixty-seven wins in 2020. Seventy-one. Seventy-seven. Seventy-six. Seventy. Eighty-one. Seventy-five. Seventy-one. Seventy-one. Eighty-five. Sixty-eight. Eighty-one.

Fourteen consecutive seasons out of October, from 2018 through 2031, which is the longest drought in club history and is still running. Nothing in it is dramatic. There is no hundred-loss collapse and no ninety-win tease. The Eagles won between sixty-seven and eighty-five games every year for twelve years, and finished fifth or sixth or seventh, and the attendance drifted down to one million eight hundred and forty-six thousand in 2027 and has come back only a little.

There have been good players in it. J.J. Hicks and Steve Schenkman won Gold Gloves together in 2021 and again in 2022. Mike Dunfee, the twelfth pick of the 2020 draft, has played nine seasons in left field, hit two hundred and eleven home runs and stolen two hundred and thirty-one bases, and won Silver Sluggers in 2025, 2026 and 2027. Arturo Molina hit .285 with a hundred and thirty-five home runs in five seasons and won Silver Sluggers in 2027, 2028 and 2029. Skylar Hoover, a tenth-round pick taken three hundred and twelfth overall, played eight years at third base and hit a hundred and forty-eight home runs. Christian Brenner made a hundred and sixty-seven starts. Alex Cardenas has appeared in three hundred and eleven games across ten seasons.

Bobby H sat in the general manager's chair through all of it and through most of what came before, from 2009 to 2029. Three postseason berths in twenty-two seasons. He gave way to Vinny D and then, in 2031, to Connor P.

The 2031 Eagles finished eighty-one and eighty-one.

V

What Being First Is Worth

Thirty-one seasons. Two thousand four hundred and three wins against two thousand six hundred and twenty-one losses, .478.

Five Octobers. Two division flags, in 2001 and 2002. Two championship series, thirteen years apart, the first won and the second lost. One trophy: the first one anybody in The Big League ever lifted.

Three Most Valuable Players — Omar Gonzalez in 2001, Jim Green in 2003 and again in 2005 — and every one of them in the first five years. Five Cy Young Awards, four of them consecutive and all five to two men. One Rookie of the Year.

Three Hall of Famers whose plaques belong here: Jim Green, who gave the club its first six seasons and two hundred and forty-six home runs; George Reed, who gave it six seasons and a 2.77 earned run average before winning two hundred games elsewhere; and Nick Henson, who was the best pitcher in this league for four straight years in a Philadelphia uniform and pitched in exactly three postseasons. Two more men in the Hall spent significant time here: Omar Gonzalez, 472 of his 1,305 games, and Marcello Bland, 449 of his 1,215, both of them elected in 2012 for careers finished elsewhere.

That is a serious amount of talent for a club that has finished first twice in thirty-one years.

The eagle on the front of the uniform is a raptor, and a raptor's whole design is patience: it sits, and it watches, and when the moment comes it does not miss. Philadelphia did not miss in 2001. It has been sitting on the post ever since, and the thing about a fence post is that the view from it is excellent and it does not get you anywhere.

The Ledger

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

Home: The Aviary, Philadelphia — capacity 45,000

Conference: Ice Conference, Sapphire Division

All-time regular-season record (2001–2031): 2,403–2,621 (.478)

Postseason appearances: 5 in 31 seasons

League Championships: 1 — 2001 (over the Phoenix Firebirds)

Championship series appearances: 2 — 2001 (won over the Phoenix Firebirds), 2016 (lost to the Oahu Paddlers)

Division titles: 2 — 2001, 2002

Best season: 2002 (105–57)

Worst season: 2006 (52–110)

Most Valuable Players: 3 — Omar Gonzalez (2001), Jim Green (2003, 2005)

Cy Young Awards: 5 — George Reed (2003), Nick Henson (2015, 2016, 2017, 2018)

Rookies of the Year: 1 — David Ramirez (2011)

Hall of Famers: three of its own — Jim Green (2014), George Reed (2021) and Nick Henson (2030).

Two more played a large part of their careers here: Omar Gonzalez, elected in 2012, for 472 of his 1,305 games, and Marcello Bland, also 2012, for 449 of his 1,215

Managers: Josh Cooper (2001–2008), Jeff Cason (2009–2029), Brian Brown (2030), Javy Salazar (2031)

General managers: Alex W (2001), Dan F (2001–2008), Bobby H (2009–2029), Vinny D (2030), Connor P (2031–)

Longest postseason drought: 14 seasons (2018–2031, still running)

Consecutive Octobers: 2 (2001–2002, and again 2016–2017)

Best attendance: 3,507,143 (2002)

Pillars of the Franchise

Nick Henson, SP (2012–2019) — The best pitcher this league has seen and the best player this franchise has had. Eight seasons, 224 starts, 1,401 innings, 100-34, a 2.13 earned run average and 1,969 strikeouts, worth 61.5 wins above replacement. Cy Young Award winner of the Ice Conference in 2015, 2016, 2017 and 2018, four consecutive seasons, with a Gold Glove in 2016. In 2017 he went 20-4 with a 1.43 and 375 strikeouts. First round, twelfth overall, 2008. Elected to the Hall of Fame in 2030, with a career mark of 193-82.

Jim Green, 3B (2001–2006) — Most Valuable Player of the Ice Conference in 2003 and again in 2005, and Silver Slugger in each of his first five seasons. Six years, 850 games, a .296 average, 246 home runs and 562 runs batted in, worth 51.5 wins above replacement, with a Gold Glove in 2001 and the most valuable player awards of both rounds before the championship series that first autumn. First round, seventeenth overall. Elected to the Hall of Fame in 2014.

George Reed, SP (2002–2007) — Cy Young Award winner of the Ice Conference in 2003. Six seasons, 141 starts, 977 innings, 52-44, a 2.77 earned run average and 1,189 strikeouts, worth 31.6 wins above replacement. He would go on to win 208 games in a career finished elsewhere, and was elected to the Hall of Fame in 2021. First round, twentieth overall, 2001.

Omar Gonzalez, 1B (2001–2003) — Most Valuable Player of the Ice Conference in 2001 and most valuable player of the championship series that same October, on the strength of a season in which he hit .316 with 60 home runs and 145 runs batted in. Three seasons here, 472 games, a .307 average and 151 home runs. Second round, 40th overall. He was elected to the Hall of Fame in 2012 for a career spent mostly with the Huron Herons.

Mike Dunfee, LF (2023–2031) — The best position player of the modern era here. Nine seasons, 1,265 games, 211 home runs, 649 runs batted in and 231 stolen bases, with Silver Sluggers in 2025, 2026 and 2027. First round, twelfth overall, 2020.

Matt Simpson, RF (2012–2019) — Eight seasons, 1,092 games, 229 home runs and 652 walks on a .219 average, the everyday bat through the Henson years. Second round, 31st overall, 2007.

Marcello Bland, C (2001–2004) — Silver Sluggers in 2001, 2002, 2003 and 2004, four consecutive seasons behind the plate on the only two Philadelphia clubs to finish first. Four seasons here, 449 games, a .280 average and 116 home runs. Elected to the Hall of Fame in 2012 for a career whose larger part was spent in New Orleans. First round, eighteenth overall, by the Galveston Gremlins.

David Ramirez, 2B (2011–2015) — Rookie of the Year of the Ice Conference in 2011, with a Silver Slugger and a Gold Glove the same season and another Silver Slugger in 2012. Five seasons, 627 games, a .276 average, 121 home runs and 406 walks, worth 26.4 wins above replacement. First round, tenth overall, 2007.

Alex Flores, 2B (2013–2017) — Five seasons, 629 games, a .276 average, 94 home runs and 140 stolen bases, worth 18.5 wins above replacement, and most valuable player of a round of the 2016 postseason run to the final.

Arturo Molina, 1B (2025–2029) — Five seasons, 637 games, a .285 average and 135 home runs, with Silver Sluggers in 2027, 2028 and 2029.

Franklin Rico, SP (2001–2003, 2005–2007, 2009) — Nine seasons and 197 starts, 1,196 innings, 74-68 with a 3.66 earned run average, and 17-8 on the championship club. Sixth round, 152nd overall.

Skylar Hoover, 3B (2021–2028) — Eight seasons, 983 games, 148 home runs and 471 runs batted in at third base. A tenth-round pick, 312th overall in 2018, and the everyday man through the middle of the current drought.

Ricardo Hernandez, SS (2014–2020) — Seven seasons and 1,050 games at shortstop through the best stretch of the modern era. First round, sixteenth overall, 2013.

Oscar Marquez, 1B (2008–2013) — Six seasons, 737 games and 157 home runs on clubs that never finished above fourth. First round, sixteenth overall, 2007, by the Huron Herons.

Dustin Faulkner, SP (2008–2015) — Eight seasons, 215 starts and 1,345 innings, 62-89 with a 4.45 earned run average, which is what durability looks like on a bad team. Fourth round, 101st overall, 2006.

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