



THE SAN DIEGO SEALS

A Franchise History of The Big League — 2001 to 2031

The deep and the surface, and nothing in between. One November on top of the world.

In the style of Geoffrey C. Ward

PROLOGUE

Two Worlds

A seal lives in two worlds and is never quite at home in either. It hauls out onto the rocks in the sun, and then it goes down into the cold dark where nobody can follow it, and it stays down there a long time, and then it comes up again. There is no in-between. There is only the surface and the deep.

No franchise in The Big League has ever understood that better than the one in San Diego, and none has ever had less choice about it.

The Seals have won a hundred and three games in a season and lost a hundred and fifteen in another. They have gone from fifty-two wins to 90 in a single winter and from eighty-five wins to 50 in five. They have won ninety games six years running and finished dead last in their division five years running. They have been, at different times, the best organization in the league and the worst one, and the trip between those two things has never taken them very long.

They have also, once, in the autumn of 2009, come all the way up into the sunlight and stayed there. That November is the reason all the rest of it has been worth sitting through.

This is the story of a franchise that does not know how to be ordinary.

I

Down First

2001 – 2002

The league opened in 2001 with everyone starting even, and San Diego went 55–107.

The next year they went 52–110.

Two seasons, a hundred and seven wins, two hundred and seventeen losses, last place in the Ruby Division both times. It is the worst opening any charter franchise in The Big League has ever had, and it happened in a brand-new domed ballpark in one of the most pleasant cities in the country, in front of people who had waited a long time for a team.

What was happening underneath the standings was more interesting, and it took a while for anyone to notice. In the inaugural draft, in the sixth round, San Diego took a left-hander named **Joe Butts**. In the 2001 draft, in the third round, they took a right-hander named **Craig Robinett**. In 2002 they took **Nick**

Schneider in the second. In 2003 they used first-round picks on a catcher, **Glen Marks**, and a right fielder, **Jose Rengifo**, and both of them would still be in the organization more than a decade later.

The 2001 club had one genuinely good player, a right fielder named **Jason Gartz** who hit .305 with twenty-seven home runs in barely a hundred games, and **Greg Keaton** took a Fire Conference Silver Slugger, and **Luis Iglesias** gave them innings. That was the whole of it. Everything else about those two summers was construction, and construction looks exactly like failure from the seats.

II

The Surfacing

2003 – 2008

Then, without any warning that made sense at the time, San Diego won ninety games.

The 2003 Seals improved by thirty-eight games in a single year, finished second in the division and played in October. Robinett, twenty-three years old and in his first full season, went 15–8 with a 2.36 ERA and two hundred and twenty-two strikeouts. Iglesias won fourteen. Vancouver beat them in the opening round in four, and nobody in San Diego much cared, because the team was suddenly good and had gotten that way overnight.

The next year they were better than anyone. The 2004 Seals went **103–59**, the best record in franchise history, won the Ruby Division, and had Robinett at 22–10 with a 2.15 ERA and two hundred and forty-eight strikeouts. In July of that season the front office made the first of the three trades that would build a champion, sending a twenty-year-old minor-league center fielder to Fort Collins for a twenty-seven-year-old infielder named **Bill Brice**. Brice is in the Hall of Fame. San Diego got him for a prospect who never amounted to anything.

And then, in the quarterfinals, Phoenix swept them four games to none.

The pattern held for four more years, and it was maddening. In 2005 Robinett went 20–5 with a 2.01 ERA and two hundred and fifty-four strikeouts and won the **Fire Conference Cy Young Award**; Brice took a Silver Slugger and a Gold Glove; the club won eighty-three and missed October. In 2006 they won ninety-six and the division, Robinett won the Cy Young again, first baseman **Mike Wilson** hit .347 with two hundred and twenty-three hits, and Louisville put them out in five. That July they traded Ed Serrano to Philadelphia for a thirty-three-year-old third baseman named **Jim Green**, the second Hall of Famer they acquired for spare parts.

In 2007 Green hit .298 with forty-two home runs and a hundred and twenty-one RBI, Butts went 17–4 with a 2.85 ERA, the Seals won ninety-seven games and finally won two rounds, and Huron beat them in the semifinal in six. In 2008 they won ninety-five and the division, Butts went 20–8, Brice took his third Silver Slugger, and Milwaukee beat them in the quarterfinals in six.

Six straight seasons of ninety-win baseball. Five postseason appearances. Not one trip to the final round. In San Diego they had begun to wonder whether the whole thing was going to be a very long story about a team that could not finish.

III

November 2009

The trade that ended the argument was made on the twentieth of July, 2009, and it cost the Seals a twenty-three-year-old minor-league right-hander named Ben Kish.

B.J. Swart was twenty-seven, a left fielder, and a New Orleans Mudcat. He came to San Diego for the last two months of the season and stayed four years, and in those four years he hit .331 with 139 home runs in only 456 games, won the Fire Conference MVP twice, and put himself in the Hall of Fame. But the two months are what matter here.

The 2009 Seals won ninety-one games and the division and went into October for the fifth time in seven years, and this time nothing stopped them. They swept Nashville in four. They beat Huron, the club that had ended 2007, in seven. And in the championship series they beat Somerville in seven games.

Robinett was the arm through all of it: 3–2 with a 1.57 ERA and thirty-nine strikeouts across forty innings in eighteen postseason games. Green hit four home runs and won the **Fire Conference Most Valuable Player Award** for the regular season, along with a Gold Glove. Glen Marks hit .317. Butts went 3–2 with a 2.55 ERA. And Swart, the rental, hit .303 with five home runs and eighteen RBI in eighteen games and was named MVP of the championship round.

For one November, San Diego was the best team in baseball, and the deep water was somebody else's problem.

They very nearly did it twice. The 2010 Seals won ninety-five games and their fifth division title in seven years, beat Louisville in six and Huron in seven, and lost the championship series to New York in six. Swart hit .329 with forty-two home runs, a hundred and thirty-nine RBI and thirty-eight stolen bases and was named MVP. The following year he was even better, .336 with fifty-one home runs, and won it again.

And that was the top of the water.

IV

The Long Dive

2011 – 2018

The 2011 Seals had the reigning MVP, a Hall of Fame rotation anchor, and a record of 80–83.

What follows is the hardest stretch in the franchise's history, and the front office did not pretend otherwise. In July of 2012 they traded Swart, twenty-nine years old and two-time MVP, to Galveston for a nineteen-year-old left-hander. On the same afternoon they sent Joe Butts, their own sixth-round pick from the inaugural draft, to Big Horn for a twenty-year-old outfielder named Chris Hysi. Robinett stayed on, and kept pitching well into his thirties, and finished 168–106 with a 3.08 ERA over 2,426 innings in San Diego, and he is the only Hall of Famer this franchise ever drafted and kept.

The bottom went on for a long time and it went very deep:

Sixty-five wins in 2013. Forty-eight in 2014. Forty-seven in 2015. Fifty-eight in 2016. Fifty-two in 2017. Sixty-four in 2018.

Eighth place in the division in five of those six years. The 2015 club lost a hundred and fifteen games, the most in franchise history. In eight seasons from 2011 through 2018 the Seals finished above .500 exactly zero times.

But the same thing was happening underneath that had happened in 2001 and 2002, and this time the organization knew what it was doing. In 2013 they used a first-round pick on a left fielder named **Gary Huber**. In 2015 they used one on a right-hander named **Bryce Dragic**. In 2017 they used one on a shortstop named **Craig Noftall**. Chris Hysi, the return in the Butts trade, hit .283 with a hundred and seventy-three home runs across six seasons. And in 2016, quietly, Joe Butts came back to San Diego and pitched seven more years for them.

A franchise that has been to the bottom before knows what the bottom is for.

V

Up Again

2019 – 2024

The 2019 Seals won a hundred and one games.

They had won sixty-four the year before. It is a thirty-seven-game improvement, the second-largest single-season turnaround in club history, and it came from exactly the players the losing years had paid for. Dragic went 22–8 with a 2.42 ERA and two hundred and thirty-seven strikeouts, an 8.5-win season, and won the **Fire Conference Cy Young Award**. Second baseman **David Ramirez** hit forty-two home runs, took a Silver Slugger, and was MVP of the wild-card round. Huber hit .270 with thirty-five home runs and thirty-seven steals. **Mitch Brandt** hit thirty-seven home runs. They beat St. Louis in five and lost to Huron in seven.

Six straight Octobers followed, and the middle of them was the best baseball San Diego had played since the title. A hundred and one wins in 2019 and out in the quarterfinal. Seventy-nine in 2020, a losing record that reached the semifinal anyway. Eighty-seven in 2021 and eighty-four in 2022, both of them ending in the round they started. Ninety in 2023, and the championship series. Eighty-five in 2024, and out in the opening round.

2023: One Game Short

The 2023 Seals were the finest team of the second era and they got closer than any San Diego club since 2010.

Gary Huber, the 2013 first-round pick, hit .311 with twenty-eight home runs, ninety-eight RBI and forty-six stolen bases in a 7.7-win season and was named **Fire Conference Most Valuable Player**. Center fielder **Quintin Cook** hit .253 through October with eighteen RBI and was series MVP of both the wild-card and division rounds. **Justin Beaty** hit .337 across twenty-three postseason games and took the conference-round MVP. Dragic went 2–0. Reliever **Juan Montoya** saved six games with a 1.84 ERA.

They beat Louisville in five, Virginia in six, and Big Horn in five. In the championship series Denver beat them in seven games.

Seven games. It was the third Big League Championship Series this franchise has played and the second one it has lost. The surface and the deep is the whole argument of this club, and 2023 is the year it came nearest to settling it, and did not.

Cook won the MVP himself the following year, hitting .291 with thirty-six home runs and 38 steals, and the Seals won eighty-five and lost a seven-game opening-round series to Kansas City, and the second era was over almost before anyone realized it had peaked.

VI

Down Again

2025 – 2029

It went the way it always goes here, which is to say quickly and all the way to the bottom.

Seventy-three wins in 2025. Eighty in 2026. Sixty-four in 2027. Sixty-three in 2028. And then **50–112** in 2029, eighth in the division, the second-worst season the franchise has ever played.

Huber's last San Diego season was 2028. Cook's was 2029. Butts had finally gone in 2022 after fifteen seasons in San Diego across two separate stints. By 2029 the only man left from the club that won a hundred and one games was Dragic, thirty-six years old, and the only other holdover from the whole second era was Noftall.

There is no way to make five straight losing seasons sound like a plan. But it is worth noting, for anyone keeping the ledger honestly, that this is the third time this franchise has gone to the bottom, and the previous two times it came back up with a hundred-win team.

VII

Breath

2030 – 2031

In 2030 the Seals won eighty-four games and went back to October.

It was a thirty-four-game improvement on 2029, and it came, again, from a homegrown player nobody outside the organization had heard of. **Trey Wood**, a ninth-round pick from the 2024 draft, hit .340 with thirty-five home runs and a hundred RBI in 471 at-bats, a 6.9-win season, and won a Fire Conference Silver Slugger. Noftall won a Gold Glove at short and so did **Barry Richards** and **Jack Withers**. Milwaukee beat them in seven in the opening round, which was a better way to lose than most of what the previous five years had offered.

The 2031 club slipped back to 77–85 and missed the cut, and there was more in it than the record said. Wood hit thirty-six home runs and drove in a hundred again and took a second straight Silver Slugger at twenty-six. Withers hit thirty home runs at twenty-seven. **Francisco Bernal** hit .301 with a hundred and ninety-nine hits. **Carlos Ayala**, twenty-four, held down center field. And a twenty-five-year-old right-hander named **Al Charles** struck out two hundred and sixty-nine batters in a hundred and fifty-four

innings, a rate no pitcher in franchise history has come close to, including Robinett and Dragic in their best years.

Dragic himself finished 6–9 with a 5.04 ERA at thirty-eight, still in the rotation, still the last man standing from 2019. He has thrown 2,621 innings for this franchise and won a hundred and forty-eight games, and only Craig Robinett has meant more to a San Diego pitching staff.

Thirty-one seasons. 2,360 wins, 2,663 losses. Fourteen Octobers, five division titles, three trips to the championship series, and one ring.

The seal has been down before. It has always come back up.

VIII

The Constant

For a few weeks at the very start of 2001 the job belonged to someone else. Everything since has belonged to **Alex W**, who has run this franchise for thirty-one years and has never run another one.

He is the only general manager in league history to have built two teams that lost more than a hundred and ten games and two teams that won more than 100. He drafted Robinett in the third round and Butts in the sixth and Huber and Dragic and Noftall in the first, and he rented B.J. Swart for two months in 2009 and won a championship with him, and he traded Swart away three years later when the price was right. He sat through 47–115. He sat through 50–112. He is still there.

Thirty-one years of the deep and the surface, and one man in the boat the whole time, watching the water.

The Ledger

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

Home: Sealdome, San Diego, capacity 45,000

Conference: Fire Conference, Ruby Division

All-time regular-season record (2001–2031): 2,360–2,663 (.470)

Postseason appearances: 14 in 31 seasons (last: 2030)

League Championships: 1 (2009, over Somerville in seven)

Championship series appearances: 3 — 2009 (won over the Somerville Moneyline), 2010 (lost to the New York Griffins, now Toronto Griffins), 2023 (lost to the Denver Dynamite)

Division titles: 5 (2004, 2006, 2008, 2009, 2010)

Best season: 2004 (103–59)

Worst season: 2015 (47–115)

Most Valuable Players: 5 — Jim Green (2009, Fire Conference), B.J. Swart (2010, Fire Conference), B.J. Swart (2011, Fire Conference), Gary Huber (2023, Fire Conference), Quintin Cook (2024, Fire Conference)

Cy Young Awards: 3 — Craig Robinett (2005, Fire Conference), Craig Robinett (2006, Fire Conference), Bryce Dragic (2019, Fire Conference)

Rookies of the Year: 0

Hall of Famers: 3 of its own — Mike Wilson (2016), Craig Robinett (2018) and Bill Brice (2018); each played more of his career in San Diego than anywhere else, and Robinett played all of his here. B.J. Swart (2020) won two MVPs in four Seals seasons but wears a New Orleans cap.

General managers: Alex W

Pillars of the Franchise

Craig Robinett, RHP (2003–2015) — Hall of Famer and the only one San Diego drafted and kept, taken in the third round in 2001. 168–106 with a 3.08 ERA, 2,278 strikeouts and 2,426 innings for the Seals, back-to-back Fire Conference Cy Young Awards in 2005 and 2006, and 3–2 with a 1.57 ERA through the 2009 title run.

Bryce Dragic, RHP (2018–present) — First-round pick in 2015, Fire Conference Cy Young in 2019 at 22–8 with a 2.42 ERA. 148 wins and 2,621 innings in San Diego across fourteen seasons, still in the rotation at thirty-eight.

Joe Butts, LHP (2005–2012, 2016–2022) — Sixth-round pick in the inaugural draft, 147–95 with 2,345 innings across fifteen San Diego seasons in two stints. 20–8 in 2008, 17–4 in 2007, traded away at the bottom in 2012 and back four years later.

B.J. Swart, LF (2009–2012) — Hall of Famer, acquired from New Orleans in July 2009 for a minor-league arm. MVP of the 2009 championship round, then back-to-back Fire Conference MVPs in 2010 and 2011. Hit .331 with 139 home runs in 456 games as a Seal.

Bill Brice, SS (2004–2010) — Hall of Famer, acquired from Fort Collins in July 2004 for a minor-league outfielder. Three Silver Sluggers, a Gold Glove, 1,070 hits and a .282 average through the whole of the first golden age.

Jim Green, 3B (2006–2009) — Hall of Famer, acquired from Philadelphia for Ed Serrano. Fire Conference MVP in 2009, 42 home runs and 121 RBI in 2007, 106 home runs in four San Diego seasons.

Gary Huber, LF (2019–2028) — First-round pick in 2013 and the face of the second era. Fire Conference MVP in 2023, 1,577 hits, 250 home runs and 426 stolen bases as a Seal.

Craig Noftall, SS (2020–present) — First-round pick in 2017, 1,337 hits and 35.9 WAR, Gold Gloves in 2026 and 2030, and the only position player to bridge the 2023 championship series club and the 2030 revival.

Also in the colors: Hall of Famer Mike Wilson hit .347 with 223 hits in 2006; Glen Marks caught 1,718 games and hit .292 across fourteen seasons; Jose Rengifo hit 290 home runs; Quintin Cook won the 2024 Fire Conference MVP; Luis Iglesias and Nick Schneider carried the rotation before Robinett grew into it.

The next dive up: Trey Wood, a ninth-round pick in 2024, has back-to-back Silver Sluggers at twenty-six; Al Charles struck out 269 in 154 innings at twenty-five; Jack Withers and Carlos Ayala are twenty-seven and twenty-four.

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