

# 2025-2026 Complete Shoals Sports Report

## Year in Review

This school year had its fair share of stories, not as many championships as last school year we saw a football, basketball, and baseball championship. We only saw a football championship this year (Mars Hill). However, we did see multiple stories develop and programs take big steps forward. We saw a runner-up in baseball and softball (Mars Hill and Colbert County respectively). We saw Sheffield and Shoals Christian take steps forward in softball. We also saw large senior classes have one last ride in Muscle Shoals football, Deshler football and baseball, Central baseball, Colbert County softball and more! So let's put the tape in and rewind the school year going from August to May.

## Football

The pre-season of the 2025 football season had its fair share of storylines. Would Muscle Shoals make a deep playoff run with a loaded senior class? Would Deshler return to the playoffs after missing it by a yard in 2024? Would Mars Hill repeat as champion or move to Class 4A with a playoff win? Colbert County's lengthy playoff streak (it has only missed playoffs once since 1980) would continue with a new coach (Oscar Bonds)? These stories dominated this season, while others popped up along the way.

### **Muscle Shoals: Dominant Defense Carries the Trojans**

Muscle Shoals was put on the map by Coach Scott Baden, who took over in 2008. That would be his worst season as the Head Coach at Muscle Shoals. Following that, he would establish a state powerhouse program in 5A that would later become 6A when 7A was created in 2014. His senior class for the 2025 season had made the playoffs all three years on varsity, from the 2022 semifinals to back-to-back quarterfinal appearances. So everyone was assuming at least a quarterfinal this season. What no one outside the locker room expected was a stingy defense that went into October before allowing more than seven points in one game. They once went 33+ days on the calendar and 146+ minutes of gametime without allowing a point.

Then the season began. Jasper was coming to Muscle Shoals in October with the 4th best offense in 6A and the 11th-best defense in 6A. Muscle Shoals would raise them defensively with the 3rd best defense in 1A-7A, allowing just 3.2 points per game. Jasper came out firing, leading 9-7 after the first quarter. It was the first competitive score on the Trojans all season. They had not allowed a point while the game result was in question until then. Jasper led 15-14 at halftime, and that was all the Vikings would score. Muscle Shoals scored the last 20 points of the game to win 34-15. After an interception thrown by Muscle Shoals, Jasper had a high snap recovered by Devin Smith and returned for a touchdown to make it a 20-15 lead.

Muscle Shoals would then get a well deserved bye week, as what had been dubbed the “Region Championship Game” awaited. Hartselle and Muscle Shoals had finished each season since 2021 as one and two in some order. Each meeting from 2022 to 2024 had been decided by six points or less (one in 2024, six in 2023 plus 2 overtimes, three in 2022). This meeting would deliver the same. Both teams top six defense in 1A-7A, top three defense in 6A, top seven offense in 6A. Something had to give.

If Jasper thought 9 was a good first quarter, how about a 14-0 Hartselle lead after the first? Including a flea flicker touchdown for Hartselle. A nightmarish first half for Muscle Shoals ended with a 17-10 lead for Hartselle. Muscle Shoals added touchdowns in the final minute of both the second and third quarters. Sending it to the fourth tied at 17. If the first half was a dream for Hartselle and a nightmare for Muscle Shoals, well, it would flip in the second half. Hartselle would not score again. Tylan Smith had two fourth quarter interceptions to lead to a Muscle Shoals touchdown. Muscle Shoals would score the final 28 points of the game to win 31-17 and win the region championship for a third straight season.

Playoffs came once again for Muscle Shoals, and the defense stayed locked in. Allowing 12 in the first round. Then, surviving Parker, in a 17-14 win, to advance to the quarterfinals. Mountain Brook would not score over seven in a 24-7 win. Then came the next big test for the defense in the playoffs. Clay-Chalkville would defeat Muscle Shoals in the semifinal round 30-13. While the season came to an end, it was still successful for Muscle Shoals.

However, the biggest story of this season would be how it would be Coach Basden’s final season. He would announce his retirement in late February. He coached Muscle Shoals for 18 years, leading them to 170 wins, eight region championships, making the playoffs each season since 2009, one championship game appearance, and putting Muscle Shoals football on the map as a state powerhouse.

### **Deshler: Return to the Playoffs**

2024 was an odd year for Deshler football, as when the calendar flipped to November, they only played one game on November 1, and it was the season finale. 2025 would be the normal year for Deshler as they returned to the playoffs in a big way. They began the season by defeating Russellville and Hatton, the two that made Deshler begin 0-2 in 2024. The 2024 Hatton game would cost Deshler a playoff spot. Once Deshler got off to a 2-0 start in 2025, everyone was on the same page, it seemed, as we all expected a collision course with West Morgan in the last game.

West Morgan-Deshler has developed into a multi-sport rivalry over the last few years with basketball and football. In 2024, West Morgan entered undefeated and had never had back-to-back 10-0 seasons. Deshler almost got them in 2024. A two-point conversion attempt came up just short in that meeting. In 2025, West Morgan entered with a 33-game regular season winning streak, where the last loss was to Deshler in 2022. Deshler had not won at West Morgan since 2012. The stage was set, both teams were 9-0, and the winner would win the region. The

loser would be the two-seed. West Morgan led 6-0 after the first quarter, scoring early on their first drive. It would be 13-0 at halftime, West Morgan leads. Deshler scored late in the third quarter, and Coach Patrick Malone went into his bag and pulled an onside kick. Knowing points were at a premium. Deshler recovered. They would not score and would ultimately be stopped on 4th down with 1:11 to play and two timeouts. West Morgan would win 13-7.

Deshler ran through North Jackson in round one of playoffs then an all-time classic matchup was set Deshler-Hamilton in round two. These two have been in the same region multiple times before. 50 miles separate the two schools. So it was going to be an electric environment. Both sides had air horns, vuvuzelas, and other noisemakers. They had not played since the first round of the playoffs in 2014. However, the only time Hamilton had beaten Deshler in 18 meetings was on November 14, 1924. This game date was November 14, 2025. So 101 years to the day. Do you believe in due?

Hamilton jumped to a 10-0 lead after the first quarter. The Deshler defense held strong in the second quarter, making it 10-7 at halftime. We skip to the fourth quarter, and it is 10-10. The tie would be broken in the first 13 seconds of the fourth quarter. Garrett Reid caught a pass and took it 60 yards for a touchdown, 17-10, Deshler. Just over a minute later, Hamilton tied it at 17. We go to halfway through the fourth quarter still tied at 17, and it is 4th and goal for Deshler. Price Thornton to Garrett Reid for the third time in the game. 24-17 Deshler 6:07 left in regulation. Hamilton ball, and they play it perfectly with a long drive scoring with 23 to play. They go for the tie, making it 24-24 and sending it to overtime. High School overtime is like college overtime, both teams get the ball, but from the 10-yard line. Deshler ball first, and it becomes 31-24 so Hamilton ball, and they score a touchdown. Lines up the extra point, and everyone assumes double overtime. However, Deshler had other plans; a blocked extra point would propel Deshler to the quarterfinals. Deshler's season would come to an end versus state-finalist Anniston, falling 31-7.

### **Mars Hill: One Last Ride**

The youngest football program in the Shoals has become one of the more dominant. Mars Hill began football in 2014 and quickly has risen to a state powerhouse. They won the state in 2018, 2020, and 2024. They had also never gone 15-0 until 2025.

Mars Hill opened the season with Madison Academy and sent a message from the start. That last year was over, and this year is this year. They won 51-27. The 27 would be the most the defense allowed all season. 50+ would become a theme. Beating Russellville 47-19, another message was sent. Region play began with Colbert County and a 62-24 win. Then they would only score below 52 once in region play when Lauderdale County held them to 42 in a 42-14 win. Scottsboro would hold them to 41 in a 41-14 win.

The playoff bracket could not have been more perfect. Mars Hill got to play at home all four rounds before state and did not score below 42 in a playoff game. Coasting to the state championship game with Bayside Academy.

Bayside would be the first and only team to hold Mars Hill under 40 points. The halftime score was 14-6, Mars Hill leading but still dominating in the stats. Hudson Higgins had more rushing yards than Bayside had total yards at halftime (119 to 88). Bayside got within three in the third quarter, but that would be as close as it would get. Jaxon Penn broke a 89-yard rush for a touchdown in the fourth to seal it. Hudson Higgins iced it with :15 to play and made it 38-21 Final.

Mars Hill had done it. They had repeated and finished 15-0 both firsts in program history. They also played the entire season without trailing. They set a new team record with 757 points scored in a season. That is an average of 50.5 points per game. The defense only allowed 11.5 points per game.

However, what we all did not know was what was coming next. The AHSAA would decide to split the private schools into their own classes for playoff contention. So the 2026 season will not see Mars Hill in 4A (due to competitive balance factor). It will see them in Class Single-A Private with all private schools.

We also did not know this would be the final season of Coach Darrell Higgins at Mars Hill. His son and running back Hudson Higgins graduated, and Darrell would take the job at Russellville who will be a 5A in 2026. He leaves Mars Hill after 10 seasons, five championship appearances, four championships (1A 2018, 2A 2020, 3A 2024, 3A 2025), and 107 wins. Winning 10+ games each season since 2018.

### **Other Highlights**

Each season has its major stories and then its supporting stories. Some programs saw leaps this season, while others saw continued success. Two programs made the playoffs with first-year head coaches and won a playoff game. Colbert County and Oscar Bonds, then Lexington with Brett Mask. Shoals Christian scored a game-tying touchdown as time expired versus rival Waterloo and made the extra point to make the playoffs.

Wilson won three games (most since 2018) in year three of Coach Trey Lane. Beating Danville 45-14 and then in October they won back to back games for the first time since 2018, as well as beating West Limestone and East Lawrence. They will come down to 3A in 2026 and hope to improve on their success in 2025.

What may have been the craziest story of all season and all school year was 7A Region 4. Florence found themselves in a four way tie for the region championship. All four teams (Sparkman, James Clemens, Austin, Florence) were 5-2 in the region, but Sparkman and James Clemens were 5-5 overall, while Austin and Florence were 6-4 overall. To explain this in the simplest way, we will show you the post from our facebook page, breaking it down.

7A Region 4 Result (this is a long explanation)

1 Sparkman

2 James Clemens

3 Austin

4 Florence.

Tiebreaker G: wins over 5-seed (Huntsville), everyone but Austin beat Huntsville.

Austin out of the tiebreak

Go to 3-teams w Florence, JC, Sparkman (and go back to top of tiebreakers)

Tiebreaker H: wins over 6-seed (Bob Jones), everyone but JC beat Bob Jones

Go to 2-teams w Florence and Sparkman (and go back to top of tiebreakers)

Tiebreaker A: H2H Sparkman beat Florence (Sparkman 1-seed)

Start over for 2-seed

JC and Austin both beat Sparkman (1-seed...Tiebreaker C)

H2H JC beat Austin (JC 2-seed)

Start over for 3-seed

Austin-Florence.

Austin beat Florence (Tiebreaker A)

Austin 3

Florence 4

Tiebreakers on Page 10

<https://ahsaa.com/Portals/0/Publications/2025-2026/126391%20football.pdf?ver=Q82VYYDPailMDFt-hrSHFQ%3d%3d&timestamp=1753913372577>

Why was it such a big deal? The state had redrawn the 7A bracket outside of the traditional north-south split in order for better playoffs. So this was the first year that Region 4 (Huntsville) would cross and play Region 1 (Mobile). Everyone had assumed it was going to be whoever won in their final game would win the region, which Florence did. However, this happened on Monday of that week, so it was already determined.

Florence and Austin would draw the short end and travel to Mobile for playoffs round one. Florence would get hotel rooms for the night before and charter buses. Unfortunately, all four teams' seasons came to an end in the playoffs.

# Basketball

The Shoals entered the 2025-2026 season coming off an impressive showing at the Final Four in 2025. You had Florence boys coming off a runner-up finish, and Mars Hill boys finished runner-up as well in 2025. Then you had Lauderdale County girls, coming off a comeback win, winning the state championship. However, this season would have ups and downs for all three of those programs and the entire area.

## November

We began our coverage at Mae Jemison, seeing a new look Florence boys team start their season with 7A powerhouse Huntsville. Now, at the same time, a lot of schools were waiting for football to finish or taking a week or two extra to practice. Florence would come up short, but it was a solid test to see where they were. One early highlight from November was Belle Hill posting a 45-point, 16-rebound, 11-steal triple-double in a win over a 3A Mississippi team, Our Lady Academy.

The Wilson boys would take a trip that would make memories for a lifetime. They traveled to Knightstown, Indiana, to play Section (AL) at the gym Hoosiers was filmed. They would come up short, but were in the game the whole time. They played Section because you have to find your opponent to play up there. Coach Corey Krieger would potentially answer any questions about how to get the planning started. We did a story on this. [Linked here](#). Then we entered Thanksgiving week where nearly everywhere you looked there was a tournament going on.

November was a solid month locally. You have to take it with a grain of salt, as it is a mixed bag with teams coming off football on the boys' side and the girls' side, and you are potentially playing tougher competition in tournaments.

## December

The calendar turned to December, and Christmas was everywhere, but area play would get underway before Christmas. December 2nd was a solid night locally. Rylan Pettus gave an early bright spot for Shoals Christian, scoring a career-high 44 points to win their first game since the 2024 Sweet Sixteen. He also nailed a shot at the buzzer to beat Hackleburg in overtime. The same night, we saw some other highlights as Deshler won a thriller at Lauderdale County in a matchup of what would be two final four boys teams. Florence boys got their first win over Muscle Shoals, which was the last team to begin play after football made the semifinals.

Wilson would spoil the festivities for Hatton's new gym opening on December 5th. Noah Hetrick scored all of his 15 points on three-pointers. James Mallette shot 73%. Wilson boys ended the third quarter on a 15-0 run to lead 45-30 and essentially put the game out of reach.

December 9th, Deshler traveled to Central for an area game. During the girls' game, Reece Davis (junior, Deshler) surpassed 2000 career points. She is well on her way to breaking the school scoring record of 2830 points currently held by Chloe Siegel. Reece ended the season at 2726 points. In a stunner, Central boys beat Deshler later that night by three in a result that would have a long-term impact. Deshler girls would hand Wilson their first loss later that week by four points.

The Brooks and Deshler boys have become a fun rivalry on the court in the last couple of years. They also provided an exciting finish on December 15th. Miles Warren had 5.6 seconds in a tie game; he would go the length of the floor to beat Deshler at home. He went 13-14 on free throws in that game, as well as Tanner Bowens having 24 points, which was a new career-high. Brooks could only celebrate for a few days, as they would go to Central on December 19th, and Cole Wilcoxson banked a three-pointer at the buzzer to beat Brooks.

One of the more fun rivalries is Central-Wilson. Central girls handed Wilson their second loss of the season just before Christmas. Wilson boys repaid Central by splitting the nightcap as Wilson continued their early-season success. The season would take a brief two-day break for Christmas before the post-Christmas tournaments began.

Lauderdale County girls entered Christmas Day at 8-3. They would enter the new year at 8-6 before falling to 8-7. Losing games to South Gibson (TN), Loretto (TN), Florence, and Priceville.

Reece Davis had 46 points on 8-10 from three-pointers in a win over Southside-Gadsden during the break.

## **January**

The Hatton boys spoiled the New Year festivities at Deshler by beating Deshler 69-68 sinking Deshler boys to their third area loss. That same night, Kacie Nelson had 34 points in a new career-high vs Hatton in the girls' game. Garrett Reid notched a career-high 36 points, scoring the first 18 points of the third quarter for Deshler to give them a two-point lead after trailing by five at halftime.

One of the most anticipated but short-notice games was Mars Hill girls versus Deshler girls on January 10th. Deshler got the comeback win, but Belle Hill had 32 points while Reece Davis had 34 points. The same night, Lauderdale County would have its skills competition at Wilson before the County Tournament began. Isla Hardy (Central girls) and Miles Warren (Brooks boys) won the three-point contests. Will White (Lexington) defeated Hazi Spearman in the one-on-one finals.

The Lauderdale County tournament brought some career-highlights. Central's Jill Huffaker and Isla Hardy had career-high's on back-to-back nights, Huffaker 25 versus Waterloo in a win, Hardy 27 versus Wilson in a loss. Career-highs became contagious as Madison Mobley had 25 in a win over Lexington the same night Hardy had 27.

January brings area games with more intensity because they mean things such as seeding and hosting privileges. Deshler boys would beat Wilson in overtime at Deshler, but the 4A boys area tournament would be at Brooks. After snow and ice came and went, we would get to February while the weather tries to heat up. The action on the court would heat up as well.

### **Playoffs**

We start the playoffs at Brooks with the 4A boys area tournament. Central beat Wilson in a close game that added more fuel to the rivalry. Deshler would begin a final four run that no one outside the locker room expected. Muscle Shoals got tested by Athens in the first round at home but held on to win by three. Wilson held off Hatton to win and advance to sub-regionals. That is all the drama in the area tournament as we move to sub-regionals, where it would be win or go home.

In a fun local matchup, we saw Colbert County at Mars Hill on both the girls' and boys' sides. Mars Hill boys were under .500 all season, but had played a schedule that was full of 4A-7A opponents. Mars Hill would sweep Colbert County.

The highlight on the girls' side would be Wilson. Who had come up short of regionals last season. They would win in sub-regionals this season, beating Haleyville 40-36 and surviving Haleyville's stall-ball tactics with no shot clock. The game was tied at 29 at halftime, and Wilson led 35-33 with 1:30 left in the third quarter. Haleyville then decided to hold the ball for the quarter and take a three-pointer to make it 36-35 at the end of the third. Coach Eric Oakley (Wilson) said we can do that too, and began to hold the ball. It was 40-38 Wilson with 3:08 left in the game. It would end with that score as the final.

The Deshler boys had to fight against Fayette County to win and advance. Garrett Reid sealed it with a steal in the final seconds. Deshler led 54-52 with :34 to play. Fayette had been hitting threes consistently, but not this possession. Garrett would steal the ball with around five seconds to play and go for a layup to seal the win 56-52 and send Deshler back to Regionals.

The scene would shift from local gyms to Wallace State, where the games got bigger. The morning began with a Mars Hill sweep (girls over Holly Pond and boys over Winfield), and for the boys, the tough schedule paid off. The Shoals success continued with Lauderdale County girls and boys winning. Setting up and guaranteeing at least one Shoals school would be in the final four on both the boys' and girls' sides. Wilson then made their regional debut and played the deepest into the season since 1990 (regionals began in 1994). They would make the Shoals 5-0 on the day.

It was then time for the Shoals area to be tested. West Morgan boys would beat Brooks, then Deshler girls fell to Good Hope, before Deshler boys survived East Lawrence. Muscle Shoals would then fall to Lee-Huntsville before Florence girls fell to Hillcrest-Tuscaloosa. The Shoals sent five teams to the Sweet Sixteen (Regionals first round) and went 5-5. We then proceed to the Elite Eight. Wilson would fall to Good Hope for the second straight season, but this time two rounds later.

Then came the drama and the rivalry. Deshler-West Morgan in a late-night battle, winner to the final four, loser goes home. These two have had some battles the last couple of years in basketball and football. It was set up to be a classic, and classic it was. Deshler led by nine at halftime. West Morgan had a big third quarter to tie it at 36 heading to the fourth. Back and forth it went down the final few minutes before settling in for another great finish. West Morgan led 47-43 with 1:30 left, but then threw the ball away with :46 to play, leading 47-45. Jalen Thirkill came up clutch, scoring the next four Deshler points to tie at 47. Garrett Reid put Deshler ahead 48-47 with 5.9 seconds left on a free throw. He was fouled after he stole a pass on a West Morgan possession and went for a layup. Deshler had fouls to give (lesson learned from the Miles Warren game-winner earlier in the season, they could have fouled him), but the fouls reset West Morgan and did not allow free throws. West Morgan got a look to win it, but Thirkill again came up with a block to deny West Morgan, or so we thought. The clock had expired, we thought. They put 0.2 seconds back on the clock, so it had to be a tip-in and no shot for West Morgan. The game was over.

Tuesday brought us Lauderdale County and Mars Hill. The good part is they split, and both fan bases got to advance to the Final Four. The bad part is the boys' game. Lauderdale County ran through Mars Hill boys with a 74-48 win. The Lauderdale boys' team is a very young team and may have played above their head this season, but they got valuable reps for next season. Mars Hill had played a tough schedule to get here and just did not have enough to compete with Lauderdale.

The girls' game was a battle. Mars Hill won 71-62, but Lauderdale would not go away. Mars Hill led by 17 in the third quarter. Lauderdale got it to five with 2:40 to play in the fourth. Belle Hill led Mars Hill with 32 points.

However, all three teams' runs would end in the final four as all three lost to the eventual champion in each class. Each final four game would also be the closest for each champion during the final four. This would be the first year since 2011 that no Shoals team would advance to the championship game.

Mars Hill girls and Lauderdale County boys had a similar story. They both ran into buzzsaws. Saint James beat Mars Hill girls by twenty; they basically let Belle Hill have her game and took away the help. Belle had 38 points and 16 rebounds; the rest of the team had 18 total points. Lauderdale County ran into Montgomery Academy (who defeated the 2025 Mars Hill boys to win in 2025). Lauderdale trailed by one at halftime, but a 21-8 third quarter put them behind the eight-ball.

The closest game of the Final Four for the Shoals was Deshler-Fairfield. Deshler led by two at halftime. Fairfield would take a three-point lead with 3:17 to play in the third quarter and decided to hold the ball until the end of the quarter. They led by five at the end of three. The lead grew to 10 with 2:00+ to play. Deshler cut it to three with :30 to play and had a chance to tie, but a controversial backcourt call ended the chance for Deshler, so they never got a shot off. Fairfield won by four, 61-57.

A couple of things to take away from this season. Next season, Montgomery Academy will not be able to play Lauderdale County in the playoffs due to the private-public split. Mars Hill and Saint James will be together in Single-A Private. Fairfield, nor anyone, will be able to hold the ball for minutes because of the shot clock coming in.

# Baseball

Historically, baseball/softball is one of the Shoals' more successful sports. Each school in Lauderdale County can point to a run to at least the semifinals if not the championship game. Colbert County schools have had flashes of success. Baseball is also one of the last sports to end each school year, so it becomes more emotional with that as well. This season brought its fair share of stories, drama, and emotions. Some of the stories of this season were the 1A Area 16 drama, Mars Hill returning to state, Deshler and Central each had large senior classes, and more.

## Early Season

February baseball is like November basketball. It is a mixed bag because with basketball ending, you never know how a team will play until they are fully all back. Deshler and Lauderdale County were two teams in this situation. Deshler was 4-3 until they got Garrett Reid and Jay Murner back. They would finish the season 32-5 at full strength. Lauderdale County began 1-4 after an 0-4 start without their basketball guys. They would finish 20-13 at full strength. Everyone else was at full strength around a week into the season. Deshler and Lauderdale County played two weeks without basketball guys. Deshler opened the season at Haleyville with an 8-0 win, the site of last season's quarterfinal series. Wilson's coach, Warren Fowler, had a special opening-day win, marking his 200th career win as a head coach between his two stops at Florence and Wilson.

March 5th, we saw our first perfect game of the season in baseball or softball. Malachi Sewell (Shoals Christian) pitched a perfect game at Vina in a 12-0 win with 13 strikeouts across seven innings (complete game). Sewell would be part of a combined no-hitter later in the season versus Phillips with Reece Jackson, Bo Saylor, and Max Quimby. That same night, area play in 4A began with Brooks at Hatton. Brooks would drop game one but win games two and three to win the series. This was also the first night Deshler was at full strength. They got a comeback win at East Limestone with a four-run seventh inning.

That same weekend, we would see a preview of the 2A Championship series. Mars Hill and Lauderdale County went to Tuscaloosa for an invitational tournament. Mars Hill played both of the south semifinalists in 2A (GW Long and Arton), beating both 1-0 and 9-6, respectively. Lauderdale County also got a win as it was their first night with everyone back from basketball.

Brooks quickly became one of the stories of the season as they would lose game one of the area series with Central, but win games two and three again. Wilson would take the series over Hatton, putting Hatton in a hole early. Brooks was already 2-0 in the area series early and was eyeing the playoffs.

Deshler opened area play with a scare from Wilson winning 4-3, but Deshler led 1-0 from the first inning to the sixth when they added three, making it 4-0. Wilson made a late push, scoring two in the sixth and one in the seventh. The next day, Deshler would erase all doubt of a scare winning both games by a combined score of 23-0 (5-0, then 18-0)

## **1A Drama**

One of the most fascinating stories that developed during the month of March into April was Class 1A Area 16. The four teams are Cherokee, Covenant Christian, Shoals Christian, and Waterloo. Cherokee would miss the playoffs, but the tiebreaker would see Covenant, Shoals, and Waterloo all 4-2 in area games and all 2-1 in series. They had all split versus each other, so head-to-head was out. It wound up going through four tiebreakers, which included record versus all common opponents, in-class then common opponents in class and above, then it went to all common opponents in class, then it was broken with all non-area teams in class. That last tiebreaker is your non-area games winning percentage versus teams in 1A (in this situation). Covenant had only beaten Vina, so they were 100%. Waterloo was 2-0 versus Vina and Phillips. Shoals Christian was 2-4 at the time. So Covenant and Waterloo were playoff bound but then had split their area games but Covenant won game three and the series to become area champions. The ironic part of all this is that Covenant had the worst overall record of all three. Waterloo was the only team with a .500 winning percentage. Shoals Christian finished 11-12. It was an unfortunate way for a season to end for Shoals Christian.

## **Spring Break**

Spring Break is a marking point for the high school season. You should know by this time what your team is and what you can do in the postseason. It also provides a chance to get out of town and play some teams you would never play. Deshler went to Oxford, AL, and Atlanta and went 6-1, highlighted by a Dylan Olive no-hitter versus Lawrence County in five innings; he had eight strikeouts as they won 12-0. The loss was to Arkansas 7A Van Buren. Mars Hill went to Atlanta, and after a loss to Van Buren, they won their next two, including a walkoff home run from Cody Willis to beat Lexington (Massachusetts) 4-2. Florence, Muscle Shoals, and Sheffield went to the beach. Central went to Louisiana. Brooks finished the week at Rickwood Field, winning 5-2 over Fayette County.

## **Playoff Push**

The break was over, and now it was time to lock in for a playoff push. Waterloo would start its push with a 35-run performance at Cherokee. They then scored 24 runs at home the next night.

We then move to April, where Central's season would hit an inflection point. Dylan Olive no-hit Central at home on April 3rd. Deshler swept the three-game series, winning all three by a combined 17-0 score. (10-0, 6-0, 1-0). That was all the losing Central would do for a month plus.

Baseball is a marathon, not a sprint. Brooks and Wilson learned that the hard way. Game one of their area series was the third-longest in state history. They played 15 innings, just over four hours, 472 combined pitches in 132 combined plate appearances. Brooks would win 5-4 but led 3-1 after the first. Mason Gandy walked it off with two outs in the 15th with a double that scored Charlie Buttram, who reached on a double with one out. Brooks would win the series the next day, winning 17-2. Setting themselves up for a playoff opportunity.

Central had the simplest scenario: win out and make the playoffs, but they had to beat Hatton and Wilson and swept both. Brooks needed to beat Deshler in game one or game two. They did not beat Deshler in any of the three games, so Central was in the playoffs, despite losing the series to Brooks, as the two-seed behind Deshler as the area champion.

### **Playoffs**

The Shoals would send seven teams to the playoffs. Covenant Christian (area champion), Waterloo (area runner-up), Mars Hill (area champion), Lauderdale County (area champion), Colbert Heights (area runner-up), Deshler (area champion), and Central (area runner-up). Covenant, Waterloo, and Colbert Heights all lost in round one. The others were still alive after a mostly drama-free round one.

Mars Hill would get to play Vincent and try to avenge a semifinal loss from last season. Beau Willis threw a 53-pitch no-hitter in game one before Mars Hill dropped game two. They would dominate game three to advance.

Central spent the first two rounds on the road due to bracketing rules and an upset. They swept Plainview before they came back home to play Alexandria in the quarterfinals. The other half of the 4A North bracket saw Deshler advance to set up a one versus two matchup between Deshler and Westbrook Christian.

Lauderdale County would come up just short of forcing a game three versus Piedmont. They led 2-0 into the sixth inning before Piedmont went up 4-2. Lauderdale would have runners on first and third with no out, then a sacrifice bunt moved the runner to second with one out. So two on, then two outs, a strikeout would end the threat and season.

### **Quarterfinals**

Progressing into the quarterfinals, we saw more drama. Mars Hill and Central would advance to the semifinals. Central coasted versus Alexandria with two convincing wins, 10-2 and 5-2. Central would be making its first semifinal appearance since 2009. Mars Hill decided to do it the hard way this week after losing 1-0 in game one on an unearned run and only allowing two hits. Game two would go to Mars Hill. They led 2-1 into the bottom of the seventh. Lindsay Lane would tie it on an error. Extras were on deck. Mars Hill scored four in the top of the eighth. It started with a triple from Cody Willis, then Noah Hanback thought he had a home run, but it was ruled a long single, so 3-2 Mars Hill. They would add three more, making it a 6-2 final. Game three was a battle as Mars Hill jumped out 2-0, then Lindsay Lane countered with four to lead 4-2 into the fourth. Mars Hill would score the next eight runs, making it 10-4, before winning 11-6 and advancing back to the semifinals.

Deshler's title defense would end in the quarterfinals to Westbrook Christian losing in two games. Game one was 10-8, Westbrook. Deshler was playing from behind the whole game. Deshler scored seven across the fifth and sixth innings to make it 9-8. Game two was 9-4 Westbrook, but they had a five-run top of the seventh to ice it. Deshler took the lead in game two

in the fifth. Now in baseball, you cannot always guarantee your best bat or guy you want with the game on the line will have the chance. However, Brycen Williams reached on an error, and Camden Fuller walked to set the stage. Garrett Reid, who had come up numerous times in football, basketball, and baseball last season, would have a moment trailing 3-1 and down to their final seven outs. He would hit a three-run home run to put Deshler up 4-3. Westbrook tied it in the sixth at 4-4. Then went ahead with a five-run seventh inning, making it 9-4 final.

### **Semifinals**

Mars Hill would begin the semifinals with a bang! 16 runs in the first two innings and 11 in the first inning for Mars Hill is how they would begin the series at Red Bay. The entire lineup had a hit and run or run batted in. Coach Josh Willingham got to mix and match his pitching, preparing for a potential game three due to the big lead. Mars Hill won 21-6 in game one. Game two would need a comeback. Red Bay jumped to a 3-1 lead through three innings. Malen Moore tied it on a single, scoring Luke Fowler in the bottom of the fifth. Fowler then put Mars Hill ahead 4-3 in the sixth with a sacrifice fly scoring Bryce Graham. Mars Hill was headed back to the championship series for the 16th time.

Central would start with a bang also. Westbrook jumped to a 3-0 lead in game one. Reed Bruce then capped a big second inning with a grand slam to make it 7-3 Central through two innings. Westbrook would chip away in the fourth, making it 7-4, then a five-run seventh inning made it 9-7 Westbrook. Central had now lost for the first time since the Deshler series. Game two could have been a football game if you saw the score 14-10. Central had a five-run second inning, making it 5-2. Through the fifth inning, Central led 7-5 before opening it up in the sixth, making 11-7 through six innings. Each scored three in the seventh, making it 14-10 Central. Game three was necessary in the semifinals. Game three would see Central score in each of the first six innings, but it was only one run at a time. Westbrook broke it open and took the lead for good in the fifth, making it 7-5. Westbrook faced an interesting spot in game three. It was 9-5 Westbrook in the sixth. Reed Bruce came up with bases loaded, and Westbrook decided to intentionally walk him and walk a run in, making it 9-6, the eventual final. The next batter would pop out to end the inning.

### **Championship Series**

It would be Mars Hill and Ariton for the 2A Championship, a rematch of the 2024 championship series.

Pitching will take you places you did not know you could go. Game one of the 2A Championship series proved that. Game one was scoreless through four innings. Beau Willis threw seven innings, allowing three hits, and only a walk and one strikeout. His offense helped late, scoring one in the fifth, two in the sixth, and one in the seventh. Ariton had a hit in the first inning and then not again until the sixth inning. Mars Hill won 4-0 and was one win away from another state championship.

Game two was the same story, but on a different side. Mars Hill struck out 13 times to Addison Senn, who had 47 strikeouts in four playoff games. He had 30 in the quarterfinals and semifinals combined. Ariton won 6-1, forcing a decisive game three.

Game three began like the series looked 1-1 after the first inning. Ariton led 2-1 in the second. We skip to the sixth inning, where Mars Hill would tie at two. Ariton had a couple of singles, then an error put Ariton up 3-2 in the seventh. Two more singles made it 5-2 Ariton. Mars Hill was not going away quietly after two quick outs. Beau Willis and Noah Hanback reached on a single and a hit by pitch. The tying run came to the plate, but a strikeout would end it, and Ariton won their third championship in four years.

# Softball

From a hashtag that rallied a team to a team making school history to one team repeating as area champions despite not hosting the area tournament in either year. They all sound like movie storylines; however, all three were real-life stories from the 2026 softball season. Shoals Christian made regionals for the first time since 2017. Colbert County brought home the first girls trophy in school history. Wilson was a repeat area champion in an area with two 40+ win teams. These are some of the major stories of the 2026 softball season.

## Early Season

What would become one of the major stories got started early. Makayli Davis (UNA signee) from Colbert County struck out 17 on opening day in a win over East Lawrence. She would finish the season with 576 strikeouts, leading the nation. Davis would throw a no-hitter versus Belgreen on March 12, then the next day a perfect game versus West Point.

Mars Hill started the season rough. They were 0-4 before beating Brooks. They would be 1-4 without the girls (Molly Wright, Briley Durham, and Lila Embry) from basketball. They would finish the season 22-22 at full strength.

Sheffield got their first win since March 2023 in February of 2026 over Tanner winning 18-3, and the whole lineup scored a run in the win. They would continue their winning ways in March 2026 with another win over Tanner, this time 27-15. Marking the first consecutive wins for Sheffield since April 2018. Coach Shannon Casiday was on that team in 2018 and now is the head coach for Sheffield. Sheffield would only win those two games this season.

Softball is a tournament sport, and there are two local tournaments that become marking points for the season. The TimesDaily tournament in March and the Bash tournament in April. The TimesDaily tournament is at the Muscle Shoals Airport Complex and features mostly local teams, and we get some fun matchups. The Bash tournament is at the Florence Sportsplex (same site as regionals) and features teams from all over the north half of the state. Central and Deshler both had outstanding weekends at the Timesdaily tournament. The bash tournament would be rained out early into bracket play.

## Spring Break

Speaking of tournaments, the weekend spring break began with the Elkmont tournament. Once it got to the bracket portion, the Shoals teams beat each other in the bracket. Central beat Lexington and Mars Hill on their way to winning the tournament. Lexington had a comeback win over Belgreen 9-7 with a five-run fourth inning. That would be a precursor to a regional matchup.

Deshler went to Gulf Shores and went 4-2 before falling in bracket play. Murfreesboro hosted a large tournament with schools from all over that included the following local schools: Lauderdale County, Colbert County, Florence, Shoals Christian, Waterloo, Colbert Heights.

Brooks went to Pelham for a tournament. Wilson went to Oxford, AL, a place they hoped to end their season at and get familiar with the fields. All teams performed well over this week with higher competition. Some highlights from this week included Makayli Davis surpassing 1000 career strikeouts. Florence had a four-run inning to walk off with a win. Colbert Heights went 3-0, including a walk-off win. Wilson went 2-2, only losing to 6A and 7A schools.

### **Late Season**

Late season softball features more tournaments, and we progress to the Lauderdale County Tournament. Where we saw a matchup three times in two days. A matchup we would eventually see seven times this season. Wilson and Central, a classic Shoals rivalry, would play in the opening round and county championship. Wilson won the opening round game to get their first win over Central this season. Wilson beat Florence in the winner bracket final 24-8 after trailing 6-2 in the second inning. Central would fight through the loser bracket, including a dramatic nine-inning win over Brooks in a game that had 29 runs on 46 combined hits. Brooks led 8-0 after the first inning. Central led 9-8 after the fourth inning. Central then beat Rogers in a one-run game Saturday morning. Then beat Florence by three. Before beating Wilson by one run, then two runs to win the county tournament.

The same weekend as the county tournament saw a record fall. Hallie Holland broke the record for most home runs in a career at Colbert County in a 6-4 win over Skyline.

Other milestones that were achieved in early April was Molly Wright reaching 300 career hits as a junior and breaking the record for most hits in a career at Mars Hill. That record was 297, held by her sister EK Wright (2023), who is now at UNA. She did this at the Bob Jones tournament that also featured Deshler and Wilson. Both of which made runs in the bracket.

The regular season would end in April, and then it was time to turn the page to the tournaments that matter the most. Area, then regionals, then state.

### **#NoMoreGreenTeams**

Waterloo, Athens Bible, and Covenant Christian all have green in their color scheme. Shoals Christian is cardinal red and Vegas gold. Shoals Christian had not been to regionals since 2017. They decided to create a mantra for this season with #NoMoreGreenTeams. From Coach Haley Hayes: “The context behind no more green teams comes from the fact we have 3 green teams in our area (Athens bible, Waterloo, Covenant). In the past, two green teams always advance to regionals (usually Waterloo & Athens Bible). It’s now our goal to eliminate the green teams from making it past the area tournament.”

Shoals Christian had a chance to host the area tournament this season, but Athens Bible ended as the 1-seed. Waterloo and Shoals Christian would play in the opening round, and Waterloo beat Shoals 2-1. The journey would then begin. Shoals eliminated Covenant Christian after beating Cherokee. Then it was Waterloo again for a spot at regionals, and the loser would be done. The game was 3-0 Shoals Christian through five innings. Waterloo made it 3-2 in the

sixth before Shoals put it away with a five-run seventh inning to win 8-2. Shoals was headed to regionals but still wanted to win the area. Athens Bible was in their way now. Athens Bible led 4-1 into the seventh inning, and Shoals had made it 4-3 with two outs and the tying run on second. A flyout would end the game, but Shoals had accomplished their goal for now.

### **Wilson Repeats**

One of the most dramatic areas the last two seasons was 4A Area 14. Last season, we saw 5-seed Wilson win this area and come up one win short of making the state tournament. This season, we began to see history repeat. Central was at the top of the area due to winning the run differential tiebreaker 13-12 over Deshler in their head-to-head meetings. Wilson would once again be an underdog on paper. Deshler had beaten Wilson in both meetings during the season, but Wilson comes alive in tournaments, beating Deshler 7-3 in the opening round. Wilson was now one win away from back-to-back regionals. They would face Central next and win that one 6-5. Leading 6-1 into the bottom of the sixth, Central scored two in the sixth and seventh innings to attempt a comeback.

Central would then have to beat Deshler in a game where the winner makes regionals and the loser goes home. Deshler had already beaten Hatton convincingly and beat Brooks in a comeback already that day. Deshler trailed Brooks 5-0 and 6-3 before tying it at 6-6 in the fourth inning. Brooks went up 7-6 in the sixth inning. Deshler tied it at 7-7 and headed to the seventh. In the bottom of the seventh, Alivia Lewis reached on a single and reached second on an error. Kendall Scogin walked it off, scoring Lewis and sending Deshler to an elimination game versus Central. Central would beat Deshler in a 1-0 pitching duel. Sadie Miles knocked in the only run on a single in the fourth. Deshler had their chances, though. In the fifth, a runner was picked off at third base. A double play ended the sixth inning. The bottom of the seventh began with a walk and a single. Central would get an out at third on a fielder's choice. Runners on first and second, one out. A double play would end the game and Deshler's season. Central's Paislee Ticer threw a complete-game shutout with no strikeouts and only two walks. Devyn Green had thrown the previous two games versus Deshler. Alivia Lewis allowed the run, but it was unearned as the runner that scored reached on an error.

The stage was set; we were going to get Wilson versus Central for the area championship. Central had to win two games. Wilson needed one as the undefeated team. This was the seventh meeting of the season for both, and Central led the season series 4-2. Wilson came out with a six-run first inning. Central made it 6-5 through three innings, then took a 7-6 lead in the fifth inning. Now we get to the exciting part. Two outs in the top of the fifth and a runner on first, EK Hewett hit a two-run homer to put Wilson up 8-7. Then with two outs in the bottom of the fifth and bases loaded, Izzy Miller hit a grand slam to put Central up 11-8. It would stay 11-8 into the seventh. Wilson began the seventh with a single and a walk, then a fielder's choice loaded the bases. Olivia Poarch cut the lead to 11-10 with a single. Poarch would be the go-ahead run. Avery Darby walked to load the bases with two outs. Hailey Rhodes to the plate. Backstory here is Rhodes transferred from Central after the 2024 season. She played junior varsity as a freshman

at Wilson in 2025. This was her first year eligible for varsity. She fouled off the first two pitches and then ripped a single. Hewett would score, and Poarch would score. It was now 12-11 Wilson. Central would go three up, three down. Wilson was area champions again, but both were going to regionals.

### **Other Area Tournament Drama**

Lexington made a return to regionals after two comeback wins. They beat Lindsay Lane after trailing 3-0 through four innings. Scoring in each of the last four innings. Matti Shook tied it at four in the seventh to force extras. Emry Ashley's sacrifice fly scored Kami Collier to advance to regionals. The next day, they would play Tharptown for the area championship. Trailing 4-0 through three innings. They would score in the fourth, fifth, and sixth to go ahead. Cooper Knox was the tying run on an error and the go-ahead run on Willa Moore's double in the sixth. Then the wheels fell off for Tharptown. Matti Shook and Jaylee Williams went back-to-back with homers to make it 9-5.

Colbert Heights beat Mars Hill twice in their area tournament by a score of 5-3 in both games. Including Addison Holcomb walking it off in the area championship game with a two-run home run.

Colbert County dominated their area tournament. Outscoring opponents 26-0 over 17 innings. Lauderdale County beat Rogers 7-6 in eight innings in the opening round, overcoming a 6-1 fifth-inning deficit. Braydee Aday scored the tying run on Maylee Chandler's double in the bottom of the seventh. Then Bailey Corum walked it and scored Blakely Cornelius to win 7-6. However, there was a play at the plate, and the umpire called obstruction. Tag was applied by Rogers' catcher, but the call was obstruction and the run scored. Rogers won 8-1 the next day over Lauderdale County in an elimination game, scoring seven in the third inning.

### **Regionals**

Regionals would take place in Florence and at the Sportsplex, the same site as the bash tournament and county tournament. The Shoals area teams are very familiar with the fields. We began on Monday with 4A Wilson and Central. Both teams won their opening round game in five innings. Central beat Cordova 13-1 and Wilson beat Dora 15-1. Wilson got down 1-0 in the first but countered, scoring seven, then three, then two, then three to run rule Dora. Central scored four in the first inning, then eight in the third to run-rule Cordova. Each team lost their second game. Central lost 2-0 to Good Hope, and Wilson lost 4-0 to West Morgan in a game that was scoreless into the fifth. The 1-1 record for each meant both had to win out on Tuesday to make state.

Tuesday was quick for both teams. Wilson lost 8-2 to Curry. Wilson had two hits and scored both runs in the fourth to make it 4-2 before Curry put it out of reach at 7-2 in the bottom of the fourth. Central lost to Hamilton 6-2, scoring in the fourth and sixth innings on sacrifice flies. Both seasons came to an end.

The stories of regionals began on Tuesday with Shoals Christian. Natalee Saylor dominated South Lamar in a 3-0 opening round win, striking out 17 of the 21 outs. That was a new career-high for her. In Shoals Christian's second-round game, they had a comeback win over Lynn. Trailing 3-1 in the bottom of the sixth, they would load the bases, then a run came in on a hit by pitch. Delanaey Powell ripped a single to tie it at 3-3, scoring Saylor. Khloe Adomyetz's walk brought in the go-ahead run (Savannah May). Shoals then needed one more win to make the state tournament for the first time in program history. They would lose both games on Wednesday, 13-3 versus Hackleburg and then 13-4 versus area foe Athens Bible. Athens Bible went up 4-0 in the third; Shoals would counter with four of their own to make it 4-4 into the fifth inning. Seven runs in the fifth for Athens Bible and two in the seventh put it away, though. However, Shoals still went farther than most thought they would this season.

Wednesday was due to be a fun day at regionals. We had four teams playing and all playing head to head in the opening round. Colbert County played Mars Hill for the fourth time this season, winning 4-3. Colbert Heights beat Rogers 6-4, withstanding Rogers' four-run sixth inning to cut into the lead. Colbert County had the most drama of the next round, beating Madison Academy 2-0 in a game where Makayli Davis struck out 13 and had a two-run home run to put Colbert County up 2-0. Colbert Heights would fall to Winfield 9-3 in the next round. Mars Hill beat Gordo 11-0. Rogers beat Whitesburg Christian 9-3.

Wednesday also saw Lexington go 2-0, beginning with a 17-0 win over Tuscaloosa Academy. Highlighted by three inside-the-park home runs, with two by Matti Shook and one by Baylee Hale. They then saw Belgreen again, where they would have to come back to win. Trailing 5-0 through two innings, Lexington scored nine runs over the third and fourth innings. Two singles started it in the fourth, down 5-3. Georgia Keeton scored the tying run on an error. Macy Davis scored the go-ahead run on an error. Then a third straight error opened it up to an 8-5 lead as Cooper Knox and Emry Ashley scored. Lexington would win 9-6. Lexington's season would end on Thursday as they lost to eventual 2A Champion Lamar County 13-0 and the eventual third-place team in 2A Sumiton Christian 10-2.

Thursday was going to be a day where the Shoals could send one or two teams to state in 3A. Colbert County made it pretty easy to get one there. Makayli Davis had a 19 strikeout performance, which was her new career-high to this point. She struck out the first 18 outs of the game before allowing an out on a ball in play. Mars Hill beat Colbert Heights after having not beaten them in any of the previous four meetings this season. Brie Robertson capped a nine-run fourth inning with a grand slam. However, Madison Academy would be the season-ender for Rogers, winning 4-0 and Mars Hill 11-2 to advance to state after beating Winfield 10-4.

### **State Tournament**

Colbert County had already made history this season. They had the most wins in program history, school history. Makayli Davis and Hallie Holland had numerous records as well. However, there was one more goal: a state tournament trophy for the girls' sports. Football and boys basketball have several each already.

The opening round saw an 8-0 lead through three innings over Glenwood. Capped by a Kylee Holland three-run homer in the second inning with two outs. Game two was another career-high by Makayli Davis as she struck out 20 batters in an 8-0 win over Hanceville. She struck out the first 20 outs of the game before a ground out ended it. She allowed one hit and only one walk.

Then we got to see the de facto state championship game between number one and number two. Saint James and Colbert County were playing for a spot in the state championship game. Davis struck out 13, and Emily Needham, a South Alabama commit (St. James), struck out 14. Needham had a perfect game for 7.2 innings before Bellah Hill had a single and then advanced to third on an error. Two one-out singles led to the game-winning run for St. James to win 1-0 in the bottom of the 8th. Creleigh Gargis attempted to turn a double play, but the throw was off at first base, allowing the run to score. The season was not over yet. Colbert County would need to win one game on Friday to reach the championship game.

After some rain late Thursday night moved Friday's games to Jacksonville State, we would finally get back to action. Madison Academy defeated 2025 champion Wicksburg to get another shot at Colbert County. Colbert County got out to a 7-0 lead before Madison made it 7-4 after the second and 7-5 after the third. Colbert County made it 12-9 through five innings. Bottom of the seventh: Colbert County now leads 12-11 after two runs so far from Madison. Tying run on second and game-winning run on first with two outs. A bloop ball over the first base bag was caught by Bellah Hill, and the celebration was on. Colbert County was bringing home a trophy regardless.

Saint James would face Colbert County again. Colbert County had to beat Saint James twice, while Saint James had up to two opportunities to win once to win the championship. Saint James would jump on Colbert County with three in the first, two in the second, and four in the third, making it 9-0. Hallie Holland scored the final run of the 2026 softball season with a home run in her last high school at-bat. She is signed to play college ball at Northwest-Shoals Community College next season. Colbert County would fall 9-1 but still bring home a red map (runner-up trophy). However, for Coach Will Inman, there's only one way it could have been a better season, and that is a blue map (championship trophy). They finished 51-10 and were runner-up. That is also the first state trophy on the girls side in a major sport and potentially any sport on the girls side.

### **Conclusion**

Summing up this year is tough because while we did not have many championships, we saw more progress for the future. The new classifications coming in 2026-2027 are exciting and we will see more drama and some new matchups. We will also see playoffs with private versus private and public versus public. So to give it one word we will say Progress for 2025-2026. When you look around the local softball scene there are a lot of players returning so we should

be in store for more drama. When you look at basketball we get one more year of Reece Davis and two more years of Belle Hill on the girls side. Football will see at least five new head coaches (Brooks: Michael Horton, Lauderdale County: Reid Newton, Waterloo: Ty Cox, Mars Hill: Chris Hill, Muscle Shoals: Michael Darden) who knows how they will pan out this coming season. We will have more on the new classes, alignments and all throughout the summer.

Zack Pounders

Shoals Sports Report