

2026 AHSAA Northwest Regional (Shoals Edition)

Most months have a theme associated with them: March Madness, Christmas in December, Halloween in October. High school basketball's month is February. AHSAA finishes playoffs just before the college game takes center stage in March but the February Frenzy can be just as exciting. Last season alone, we had Brooks overcoming a 10 point deficit in the final 1:30 and Florence making a once in a lifetime run in 7A boys. Lauderdale County girls overcame an 18-point deficit in the state championship game. What moment(s) will happen this year that we remember for years, decades, a lifetime?

The Shoals will be taking over Traditions Bank Arena on Wednesday from 9:00am to the last game; each one involves a team from the Shoals. Aside from Deshler they are all located in Lauderdale County (Mars Hill, Lauderdale County, Wilson and Brooks). Thursday night Muscle Shoals plays at 7:30pm and Friday at 9:00am Florence girls take the court. We got the chance to hear from all 10 coaches of the teams at Wallace this week for our preview so let's jump in! (Previews in game order)

Mars Hill Girls

Record: 26-4

Area Finish: Champions

Key Wins: Our Lady Academy (MS) (22-7) (+25), Mortimer Jordan (19-12), (+5)

Key Losses: Good Hope (26-6), (-10), Deshler (28-3) (-10)

Our Take: Both key wins are over Sweet 16 teams. Both key losses were on neutral courts.

However this year's team is more than just Belle Hill. She had 43 last season in the Sweet 16 and lost to Lauderdale County. The rest of the team scored 16 points. Enter Mia Humphries and Molly Wright who can both have 10 or more points any game. Belle still carries the team but she has help this season that can lead them to a deeper run.

Coach Comments (Coach Cophia Rutherford)

Q: How has having Mia Humphries and Molly Wright being able to score consistently on a night to night basis helped the team this season?

A: "Mia and Molly have both stepped up big for us as the season has progressed. They have given us more offensive weapons, and it has made it much more difficult for teams to defend us. They can't just sit back and pack it in the lane. Briley Durham has also knocked down some big shots."

Q: As a coach, who has been here before, what is the key to keeping your girls locked in?

A: “As far as keeping them locked in, a coach can only do so much. I can preach and preach and preach to them, but ultimately it comes down to the leadership within the team. They have to be willing to hold each other accountable and keep pushing one another to get it done. They have to play for each other.”

Holly Pond Girls

Record: 13-14

Area Finish: Runner-Up

Key Wins: Southside-Gadsden (13-17) (+15)

Key Losses: James Clemens (10-13) (-10)

Mars Hill Boys

Record: 12-15

Area Finish: Champions

Key Wins: Orange Beach (26-6) (+14), Wayne County (TN) (18-9) (+5)

Key Losses: Tanner (16-15), Decatur Heritage (19-8) (-10) (-7)

Our Take: Do not be deceived by the record. Outside of area teams they only played teams from Decatur, Huntsville, Tennessee mostly. Brooks was the only non-area game they played versus a Shoals team. They played Gardendale (6A), Huntsville (7A), and Madison Academy (4A) in a seven day stretch. Two words to describe this team is Battle-Tested.

Coach Comments (Coach Jeremy Pounders)

Q: How has the tough schedule prepared your team for this part of the season?

A: “I have told my guys all season that we would only grow through adversity. The guys have accepted the challenge throughout the year knowing we had some of the best teams in the state on our schedule. From the moment we got all of our guys from the state championship game, our eyes have been focused on playing the best we possibly can in February. If this meant a few losses to a 6A, or 7A team then we were ok with that. I also reminded my players that after battling some of the best players and teams in the state that there should not be any surprises once we got to 3A competition. At Mars Hill, we believe that in order to be at our best we should not shy away from good competition.”

Q: As a coach, who has been here before, what is the key to keeping your guys locked in?

A: “I think the focus has to remain on the standard that we want to play at, and continue to execute our core principles at a high level. There are so many things in a basketball game that you can't control, but we have to be relentless in the things that we can control. We are always in control of our effort, our attitude, and how great of a teammate we are each and every play. If we can empty ourselves of the negative things that weigh us down, Heb 12:1, we can compete at our best, and be happy with the result when we empty out on the court all the things that contribute to winning basketball.”

Winfield Boys

Record: 20-13

Area Finish: Champions

Key Wins: Marion County (16-13) (+24),

Key Losses: Hamilton (16-13) (-3), Red Bay (23-5) (-19), Hubbertville (28-5) (-13) (-9), Deshler (22-7) (-4)

Lauderdale County Girls

Record: 20-9

Area Finish: Champions

Key Wins: Ider (21-7) (+3), Deshler (28-3) (+6), Wilson (22-8) (+16)

Key Losses: Tishomingo County (MS) (24-2) (-17), South Gibson (TN) (23-4) (-31), Priceville (24-6) (-25), Deshler (28-3) (-14)

Our Take: Coach Clemons noted how this is the toughest schedule they have played at Lauderdale County. They have battled with some of the best in Alabama, Mississippi, and Tennessee. They have also battled several injuries and lineup changes but that also means new opportunities for players to step up and produce. Clara Freeman and Hannah Grace Belue have performed very well alongside Madison Mobley, Armani Thomas, Emery Owens, and Adeline Dickerson. The Deshler win and Ider win were at full health. South Gibson and Priceville were in the same week when the injury bug had hit. However, they will still press the whole game if they need to. That is a staple of LC Girls basketball. If you get behind and they begin pressing, then you are better off starting up the bus.

Coach Comments (Coach Carla Clemons)

Q: What does it say about this team having a late season rally and having battled adversity through injuries and a rough patch mid-season?

A: "This group of girls is a tough group. We have faced a lot of adversity with several injuries but these girls just kept pushing and getting better everyday. I don't know if you would call it a rough patch but we played the hardest schedule we have ever played here at Lauderdale County so yes we have a few losses but hopefully that just made us better."

Q: As a coach, who has been here before, what is the key to keeping your girls locked in?

A: "We are just trying to get a little better everyday and take it 1 game at a time. These kids have been here before so they know what it takes."

Vinemont Girls

Record: 22-11

Area Finish: Champions

Key Wins: Hartselle (19-12) (+4), Good Hope (26-6) (+2)

Key Losses: Pisgah (22-8) (-24), Priceville (24-6) (-17) (-4), Wilson (22-8) (-3), Good Hope (26-6) (-4)

Lauderdale County Boys

Record: 24-5

Area Finish: Champions

Key Wins: Tanner (16-15) (+7) (+36), Brooks (21-8) (+15), Decatur Heritage (19-8) (+2)

Key Losses: Deshler (22-7) (-1) (-3), East Limestone (26-4) (-37), Brooks (21-8) (-5)

Our Take: It's a rare year when LC boys have a better record at this point than the girls but LC boys are loaded with talent this season. Freshman Jayden Sears has been very impressive all season. They do not have one guy that can take over a game. They have multiple guys who can take over a game at any minute. Four of the five losses are in-state and all three of the teams are playing this week and a combined record of 69-19 (.784)

Coach Comments (Coach Whitney Owens)

Q: What does it mean to get back to Wallace for the first time in a couple of years?

A: "It's exciting to see how much our team has grown and matured throughout this season. Playing at Wallace is always one of our team goals when we start the season and I'm proud of our team for continuing to play well to earn this opportunity."

Q: As a coach, who has been here before, what is the key to keeping your guys locked in?

A: "During the playoffs, we still try to keep practice pretty similar but just shorter. What's most important to me is getting to the game healthy with fresh legs. We will do a lot more film study together and scouting our opponent in practice so we all know our opponents tendencies and personnel. I think it's important to focus on what we do well as a team that got us to this point, but to also stay loose and enjoy the moment. Ultimately, it's about playing your best when the ball is tipped up, and we'll tell our guys the same as every other game - play hard, defend, rebound, and take care of the ball and we're going to have a chance to win."

Locust Fork Boys

Record: 18-9

Area Finish: Champions

Key Wins: Appalachian (23-9) (+1) (+6)

Key Losses: Hayden (27-6) (-27)

Wilson Girls

Record: 22-8

Area Finish: Runner-Up

Key Wins: Hatton (18-9) (+13) (-8), Muscle Shoals (9-14) (+4),

Key Losses: Deshler (28-3) (-4) (-28) (-21), Belgreen (22-9) (-13),

Our Take: One of the stories of the season around the Shoals is Wilson making their first basketball regional in school history (boys or girls). They were champions and runner-up in 1989 and 1990 respectively but the regional format was introduced in 1994. The losses have all been to Deshler, Hatton, Central, Russellville, Belgreen and Lauderdale County, The common trend is all of those but Central are playing this week. They have multiple scorers in Payton Berry, Cam

Tillman, Anna Simone, EK Hewett who can also rebound very well. The only potential concern could be the stage but most of the team has been on softball and/or volleyball which both made regionals in the most recent season. Most of the team has played in high pressure moments in other sports

Coach Comments (Coach Eric Oakley)

Q: Being the first team from Wilson to make regionals (boys or girls), what does it say about the team and community?

A: "Our girls set a goal at the beginning of the season to make it to Hanceville. There have been some ups and downs this season, but we have shown a lot of grit and toughness in order to get to where we currently are and in the Sweet Sixteen. The Wilson Community has been nothing short of impressive in their support this entire season. I know our team is proud of what we have accomplished thus far, but there has also been an overwhelming sense of pride shown from our community as well. We are just proud of our team, school, and community in getting to experience a regional tournament appearance for the first time in school history."

Q: As a coach, how do you plan to keep your girls locked in?

A: "I think this is one of the hardest things to do as a coach at times, but not with this group. Yeah, we have achieved our goal in getting to Hanceville, but I do not think our girls are satisfied just yet. They have continued to be focused and their preparation each day at practice shows that they are hungry for more. We will be going against a very good West Morgan team for a spot in the Regional Championship game, but our girls will be up for the challenge."

Q: What does it mean that most of the team played in softball regionals last season so they have had high level reps?

A: "We have had a good string of athletes the last two years and prior postseason experience is definitely playing to our favor. We had a really good season last year with a subregional appearance in basketball. Softball followed that with an appearance in the regional tournament. Volleyball then made a run this season and made the regional tournament so our girls have had much experience considering most of our basketball players play volleyball and softball as well. We hope that having been in these big games before will bode well for us come Wednesday."

West Morgan Girls

Record: 22-7

Area Finish: Runner-Up

Key Wins: Hatton (18-9) (+4) (+6), Mars Hill (26-4) (+8),

Key Losses: Belgreen (22-9) (-2 OT), Good Hope (26-6) (-11) (-15), Priceville (24-6) (-9)

Brooks Boys

Record: 21-8

Area Finish: Champions

Key Wins: Red Bay (23-5) (+13), Deshler (22-7) (+2) (+12) (+5), Lauderdale County (24-5) (+5)
Key Losses: Central (13-16) (-3), Lauderdale County (24-5) (-15)

Our Take: Winning 4A Area 14 is nothing to sneeze at. A lot of the games went down to the wire. Even the area championship was closer than the five-point margin. Junior Miles Warren is the leader of this team and the guy you almost have to hope is cold the night you play them. However if he is off or cold. Tanner Bowens and Parker Murks have stepped up all season. Murks had 21 in the Sub-regional game to propel Brooks to the Sweet 16. Despite the youth of this team they have come a long way since November.

Coach Comments (Coach Rusty Murks)

Q: With a young team, how much have they grown from November to now?

A: With every team you always expect to grow throughout the season. Our goal is always to approach it to be our best in February. All games are just practices and opportunities to learn until that point. This team has been a lot of fun to coach, because being young, they have been a lot more eager to learn. Sometimes older teams think they already have it figured out and I'm sure that may be a challenge going into next year."

Q: As a coach, who has been here before, what is the key to keeping your guys locked in?

A: "If you're having to do a lot to keep your guys locked in this time of year, you're probably in trouble anyways. It really just comes down to being able to execute a game plan and playing with confidence and not be afraid to lose."

West Morgan Boys

Record: 24-6

Area Finish: Champions

Key Wins: Tanner (16-15) (+32) (+10), Hatton (20-10) (+23) (+29)

Key Losses: Cullman (24-5) (-3), Mae Jemison (19-12) (-2)

Deshler Girls

Record: 28-3

Area Finish: Champions

Key Wins: Russellville (19-12) (+27) (+32), Muscle Shoals (9-14) (+34), Decatur (28-5) (+23), Mars Hill (26-4) (+10), Belgreen (22-9) (+43), Lauderdale County (20-9) (+14)

Key Losses: Lauderdale County (20-9) (-6)

Our Take: There are few things certain in life. One of those is Coach Jana Killen winning 25+ games a season and having her team back at Hanceville. We have lost count on how many times she has been here, but they are a staple for this time of year. Led by Junior Reece Davis (Ole Miss commit) and complimented by Kacie and Kloie Nelson (AKA "The twins). They have only lost to Lauderdale County but avenged that late season, a very good West Point (27-1) but were not at full strength, and Franklin County HS (TN), but they will see a very familiar face. We can talk about rivalries in all aspects of life: Iron Bowl, Coke vs Pepsi, etc. but it will be Deshler-Good Hope for a sixth straight season. Good Hope has won the last two, and leads the

series 3-2. However, neither team has won three straight in the series. It's only fitting for Deshler to win this season and set up a potential Game 7 next season.

Coach Comments (Coach Jana Killen)

Q: As a coach, who has been here before, what is the key to keeping your girls locked in?

A: "The key is I shouldn't need to have to keep them locked in. They know what is at stake and they better be locked in on their own. I will remind them how important good defense and rebounding will be in games like this."

Q: How much of an impact has Kloie and Kacie Nelson had this season to be able to pick up the team in rough spots/games?

A: "Kacie and Kloie have been a real force for us this season. They both can score very well and can rebound. They are long and athletic which makes them a defensive weapon also. The twins and Reece Davis compliment each other very well in their playing styles."

Good Hope Girls

Record: 26-6

Area Finish: Champions

Key Wins: Muscle Shoals (9-14) (+9), Mars Hill (26-4) (+10), Marion County (28-4) (+18)

Key Losses: Hillcrest-Tuscaloosa (15-11) (-3), Priceville (24-6) (-4) (-3), West Point (27-1) (-4) (-3)

Deshler Boys

Record: 22-7

Area Finish: Runner-Up

Key Wins: Lauderdale County (24-5) (+1) (+3), South Lamar (25-4) (+13), Winfield (20-13) (+4)

Key Losses: Muscle Shoals (19-8) (-12), Brooks (21-8) (-2) (-12) (-5), Hatton (20-10) (-1)

Our Take: If you take Brooks off the schedule they have not lost since January 2nd in a one-point loss to Hatton. Deshler has only lost two non-area games to Muscle Shoals and Cookeville (TN). They return most of last season's team and most of the rotation has played and won a baseball or tennis state championship, the others have made deep playoff runs. The pressure should not be too much. Garrett Reid has scored 34, 23, and 30 in the playoffs so far. He was a sophomore on the 2024 Final Four Team. Now he is the guy for Deshler. Everett Minshew can also knock down three's from anywhere. Dylan Morgan is a force down low for this team. Garrett Reid can play both down low and top of the key. If we get to Deshler-Brooks IV it will be fun. Deshler-West Morgan would also be a fun rematch from last season's round of 32. However, East Lawrence is first.

Coach Comments (Coach Brian Pounders)

Q: How did area play and the adversity you faced during it prepare this team for this time of the year?

A: "We feel like we played a very tough schedule that helped us during the Area Tournament and during the Sub-Regional game. We knew our Area this year was loaded and that any two of the five teams could advance out of the Area Tournament. We think our difficult schedule that we played helped us advance."

Q: As a coach, who has been here before, what is the key to keeping your guys locked in?

A: "You want them to understand that this is a big moment, but not too big. We have been fortunate to have played at Wallace over the past few years, so our guys have been in that building many times through those games and summer play dates. You want them to enjoy the moment. It is extremely hard just to get there. We want them to stay locked in, but play free and loose. We are hoping that we can continue to play hard, play free on Wednesday and give it our best shot."

East Lawrence Boys

Record: 13-16

Area Finish: Runner-Up

Key Wins: Lawrence County (AL) (19-11) (+4)

Key Losses: West Morgan (24-6) (-30) (-45) (-17)

Muscle Shoals Boys

Record: 19-8

Area Finish: Champions

Key Wins: Deshler (22-7) (+12), Northridge (22-11) (+17), Bob Jones (14-16) (+18)

Key Losses: Pelham (29-2) (-14), Austin (13-14) (-1)

Our Take: Veteran-led team with five seniors who all get valuable playing time. They have also had deep runs in football playoffs so like Deshler boys the lights should not be too bright. Gavin Parrish (the lone junior starter) has been a valuable scorer each night. Keivay Foster and Jemarion Draper give size down low. KJ Cowan and Cam Hogans can also score. Christian Pritchard returned late season after an injury during football and has been valuable. The best comparison I can give is Florence boys last season with the group of seniors and experience. After escaping Athens in the area semis, they rolled past Decatur and Gardendale to be here.

Coach Comments (Coach Neal Barker)

Q: How beneficial has it been to have a group of seniors leading this team and knowing they have made deep playoff runs in football?

A: We have 5 Seniors and all have started at some point this year. They are ultra competitive and just want to win so they are willing to do whatever is needed to give us the best chance. I do believe that success in one sport can lead to success in another. Again, just teaching the toughness and how to battle.

Q: As a coach, who has been here before , what is the key to keeping your guys locked in?

There is really nothing I will have to do to get them locked in. They will play hard. If I have to motivate players, we are never going to have sustained success. That comes from them, their competitiveness, and the culture of the school or program as a whole. Obviously, I cannot guarantee we will win, there are a lot of factors that go into that. But, I have no doubt that our players will be focused and play hard.

Lee-Huntsville Boys

Record: 18-8

Area Finish: Champions

Key Wins: Mae Jemison (19-12) (+10), Austin (13-14) (+1), Bob Jones (14-16) (+5), Hazel Green (19-13) (+6) (+9)

Key Losses: Hoover (22-10) (-23), Hazel Green (19-13) (-3), Huntsville (28-4) (-2)

Florence Girls

Record: 17-15

Area Finish: Runner-Up

Key Wins: Lauderdale County (20-9) (+8), Marion County (28-4) (+22), Booneville (MS) (21-4) (+4)

Key Losses: West Point (27-1) (-29), Albertville (27-4) (-48)

Our Take: Similar to Mars Hill boys, a tough but tested schedule and in an area with powerhouse Bob Jones. 12 wins since December 29th and the only losses in that stretch were Bob Jones (twice) and Muscle Shoals. They are great defensively with Journee Hawkins being a pest when it comes to steals. Joyden Ricks can give you 20+ points a game. Trinity McCroskey can get a double-double. They were also here last season so it will not be a new experience. Coach Blair Woods has played at Wallace while in high school at Deshler and coached here with Florence and Muscle Shoals.

Coach Comments (Coach Blair Woods)

Q: What does it mean to make it back to Wallace in the last year of 7A and being the first girls team (in Florence City Schools history) to go to back to back regionals?

A: "Returning to the Sweet 16 at Wallace State is huge for our program, obviously, but we don't analyze the historical aspect of what we're doing. Our players are focused on maximizing this season and taking this team to its ceiling."

Q: As a coach, who has been here before, what is the key to keeping your girls locked in?

A: "I think it's best to keep things as simple and as normal as possible for the girls and that's through preparation, repetition, and allowing the girls to enjoy these special moments with their teammates."

Hillcrest-Tuscaloosa Girls

Record: 15-11

Area Finish: Champions

Key Wins: James Clemens (10-13) (+37)

Key Losses: Bob Jones (23-6) (-6), Albertville (27-4) (-25), Hazel Green (27-2) (-8)

Zack Pounders

Shoals Sports Report