

# 2026 SSR Baseball Season Review

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 Ariton), 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.

Zack Pounders

Shoals Sports Report