

Best Mars Hill Football Team Ever?: The Case for the 2025 Team



The numbers say yes. The record says yes. The debate can now begin. The debate should not have to go back too far, either, as Mars Hill began varsity football in 2014. Coach Darrell Higgins has been at the helm since 2016 and has turned Mars Hill into one of the state's football powerhouses. Now we can begin the debate: is the 2025 Mars Hill football team the best in program history?

“It’s really exciting to win one, we didn’t really talk about going back-to-back, we talked about getting better every week. Coach Higgins said about winning another state championship. His four rings are now tied with numerous coaches across the state, including Coach Rickey Johnson from Hazlewood. If you include his time at Deshler, Coach Higgins has six championships, winning two as an assistant in 1998-1999.

Championship Game Recap and Quotes

Before we open up the debate, let’s see how they got to 15-0. Mars Hill came into the game with everyone expecting them to win. Bayside had a young coach and a young quarterback. What chance does Bayside have? Everyone thought. Some other media outlets were making the case for Bayside as they could hang around with Mars Hill. However, you do not get to the state championship and not have a chance.

Bayside was the closest game for Mars Hill all season and was the first team to hold Mars Hill under 40 points, snapping a 16-game streak that dates back to the 2024 semifinals. Coach Higgins said “We really wanted to be challenged and liked it. It was the fourth quarter and we were challenged. That’s what we worked all year for.”

The opening drives of the game were both punts by each side. Bayside punted to the 1-yard line, setting Mars Hill up for a long scoring drive. Eleven plays later, Mars Hill would score and go up 7-0. The 6:00 scoring drive has to be one of the longer drives of the season for Mars Hill. Mars Hill would force a Bayside punt on the ensuing drive, but Hudson Higgins muffed the punt and set Bayside up with good field position. Did not matter in the long run, as Bayside would fumble and give the ball back to Mars Hill. Samuel Swinney thought he had another touchdown, this time defensively. However after review, it was ruled an incomplete pass and not a fumble returned for a touchdown. Bayside started to move the ball offensively and was then stopped. Hudson Higgins then made up for the fumble with a 34-yard rushing touchdown. Bayside added a touchdown before the half ended to make it 14-6 at halftime. Mars Hill had two and a half times as many yards than Bayside at halftime.

Bayside would fumble the opening drive of the second half. Mars Hill added a field goal in the third quarter as Bayside would add another touchdown, making it 17-14 Mars Hill lead heading into the fourth. Jaxon Penn scored early in the fourth, making it a two-score game. Bayside would punt the ball back to Mars Hill. Then came the proverbial knockout blow. Jaxon Penn 89 yard rushing touchdown to make it 31-14.

Jaxon would finish as the player of the game with three touchdowns and 222 total yards. “Feels great, my goal last year was to get back (Missed the playoffs after round one in 2024 with injury),” Penn said about winning state. He also added about the 89-yard run, “Make sure nobody catches me and get in that ‘end’ zone.” He also added how it was longer than he expected it to be. Jaxon had 206 rushing yards in the game, most of which came on the 89-yard run. He averaged 4.8 yards per carry if you take away the 89-yard run. He credited the offensive line for creating space. He said, “at halftime, they (offensive line) told him it’s gonna break.” He closed

with “it feels great because it’s the best feeling ever, winning a state championship game.” Jaxon will graduate early from Mars Hill and continue his football career at Troy.

Hudson Higgins was the player of the game in 2024 and ironically has become very familiar with Protective Stadium as he will graduate early and play football at UAB. “Crazy to think about right now,” Hudson said as he looked up at the stadium name when asked about winning here in high school and getting to play college football there. Higgins credited the offensive line as well for his big day of running the ball with 22 carries for 195 yards. Hudson also credited the health of the team this season, as last year they dealt with injuries all through the late season and playoffs.

Two of the biggest impact players for Mars Hill in this year’s championship game were Isaiah Owens and Kolten Owens. Isaiah had four catches for 72 yards, two of which progressed the ball down the field during the game. “It felt really good to be able to pass the ball and spread the offense out and open up the game for Jaxon Penn and Hudson Higgins,” said Isaiah. He also added how great it is to have guys like Jaxon and Hudson who can break runs at any time. Kolten was big on the defensive side in the secondary, finishing with seven tackles, 0.5 tackles for loss, and one pass break-up. He credited his teammates and coaches for setting him up to make those plays. He also mentioned how the defensive line getting pressure on the quarterback helps them in the secondary. “It was a little harder (playing Bayside), we had to get every key detail to 100% or they would make us pay as they hit us on some big plays. Those little mistakes, we gotta cut those out.” Kolten said about Bayside’s pass-heavy offense. He also noted how they had a couple of rough days at practice, but the coaches got after them and they got it worked out.

Coach Higgins and his team had their toughest test of the season at the state championship. Bayside played more aggressively than any other team, trying to cause tie-ups, and there was a small tie-up in the fourth quarter. Coach Higgins said, “We just had to keep playing. We knew Bayside was really good.” He closed with “this game still felt pretty stressful to me, so I don’t know.” (said jokingly, compared to the 2024 championship)

The Barbershop Debate

“This team never trailed all year. I think we punted four, maybe three times all year,” said Coach Higgins about the 2025 team. We said it at the top of this article. The numbers say yes. The record says yes. The 2025 team will be one of those talked about for years. They had a scoring differential of 570 points, which averages to 38 points per win. They played a solid schedule that had a combined record of 109-68 (.615 win percentage). That is the best since the 2020 season for a 15-game schedule. This year may be the best non-region teams they have played ever, and they ran through all three Madison Academy (4A Second Round), Russellville (5A Second Round), Scottsboro (5A SemiFinalist).

Think of all the great teams throughout football history. How many never trailed? The 2007 Patriots went 16-0 but lost the Super Bowl but never trailed in the regular season. The 2000 Ravens won the Super Bowl but lost a few games despite their dominant defense. The 2009

Alabama team that went 14-0 trailed in a few games. There are more examples, but at every moment in a championship season, you are going to be behind or have to battle some adversity. The most adversity Mars Hill may have faced before the championship was a wet field at Scottsboro after it had rained all day.

Offensively, this is the best when you look at the points scored by six points. The 2025 team scored 757 points (average of 50.5 per game). The new second best is the 2019 runner-up who scored 751 (50.1 per game). This is the third Mars Hill team to score 700+ points (2018-19, 2025). The 2025 team ups those two by scoring 38+ in each of the 15 games.

Defensively, we have to manipulate the numbers to 15-game seasons (which they have five). Mars Hill allowed 173 points this season (11.5 per game). That is the best in a fifteen-game season in program history. If you look overall, regardless of games played in a season, 2023 would be the best at 130 points allowed. That team was 10-2 and lost in the second round of the playoffs. The only achievement Mars Hill did not achieve was winning every game by 20+. Four teams have done that in state history is 1968 Lowndes Academy, 2016 Maplesville, 2019 Fyffe, and 2025 Maplesville. Mars Hill beat Bayside by 17.

Record-wise, this is the best. No argument or debate needed. 2025 will be the first team to go 15-0 in Mars Hill program history. This was the first time since 2019 that they had entered the championship game 14-0.

Mars Hill has quickly entered the discussion for best football program in the Shoals win it comes to championships. Deshler has three, and Mars Hill is now at four. Colbert County still leads the area at five championships. If you look at the regions of the state when it comes to sorting for higher-level stuff. Mars Hill is the only team in the Northwest part of the state with one in the last ten years.

Conclusion

This has been a legendary season for Mars Hill. One of those that we will look back on and say can they top that? We will have to wait and see how many players from this team make all-state. 2020 had six make all-state. 2019 had five, and 2024 had four, plus the Coach of the Year. We are not going to say whether or not this is the best Mars Hill football team ever, but the case has been made and now the debate can and will be had for years or well until they win again.

Zack Pounders
Shoals Sports Report