

Colbert County Softball: 2026 AHSAA 3A State Runner-Up (One Month Later) Retrospective



What if I told you that a team who was 18-17 in 2025 was going to make history in 2026? You would probably think history in the bad sense. However, this team would go 51-10, make a state championship game, bring home the first trophy on the girls side in school history, and bring home the first trophy in 24 years for the school. They would also be led by the national strikeout leader and a head coach who was skeptical of the job last summer but now would not change a thing. This is the story of the 2026 Colbert County Indians softball team.

We got the chance to interview Coach Will Inman one month after the season ended to look back on the 2026 season. We begin with the preseason expectations and take it all the way through from him applying for the job to a phone call with a parent to making the state tournament.

Question: Looking back at the Preseason, How far did yall expect to make it this season?

Will Inman: That's a loaded question. I thought we had a chance to be pretty good. Coach (Lee) Allen told me that we would not win 10 games. I knew we had a pitcher (Makayli Davis) and what mattered when it came to postseason time. What we had to worry about was changing the mindset and culture (of the program). Once that changed, we got hot and stayed hot. I (personally) felt like we could be really good. Did I expect 51 wins and a state championship game appearance? No. I would be lying if I did expect that. I honestly thought we were a regional day two team (final six at regionals) with a chance to make it to Oxford (state tournament).

Question: How do you change a culture in one year?

Will Inman: We came in and set our standards and held the players accountable and we worked them. If they missed practice there were consequences. Luckily, we had a great group who wanted to win. They wanted someone to come in and care about them. They bought in and got to reap the benefits of the work they put in.

Question: When did it finally hit that you had made the state tournament and then were winning a map (trophy)?

Will Inman: When we beat Madison Academy in Regionals, we had not lost two games in one day all season. I had a really good feeling that we were in. I really liked our matchup with Winfield. I felt like Winfield was a must win game because we did not want to see Cataryna Schreiber (Madison Academy) (1st Team ASWA All-State P) (Michigan State commit) again at regionals. I felt like Winfield started the wrong pitcher against us. We came in at 7:00am Thursday (morning of the Winfield game) and worked on the pitcher they did not throw against us. They then started the other girl and we had seen her a few times. We knew if they threw her we we're going to small ball. We were trying to score first and take pressure off defense and give Makayli some breathing room, since our team had never been that far before.

Part II (Winning a map): We knew the de facto state championship was the 2-0 game on day one of state versus St. James. We put all our marbles in that basket and lost 1-0. People said we could have won that game and I knew we could not because we had one baserunner through eight innings. (St. James Emily Needham had a perfect game through 7.2 innings). Makayli competed great but we just could not get on base. The only regret is not small balling more. I did think we would eventually run into one for a home run (Colbert County had seven players that had homered this season). We knew we only had to win one game on day two to get back to it. Knew it was going to be a battle (vs Madison Academy). Makayli had not thrown 300+ pitches on back to back days all season because during the season it was Saturdays and then no games on Sundays. There was no way to simulate it during the season. We started that game hot, scoring

seven runs in the first two innings. I talked with Coach Allen and my dad (assistant coach Anthony Inman) and we all agreed that there was no way we were throwing anyone else in that game. She got us to that point and we were going to win or lose with her at that point. I told them about the third inning that we were going to have to outthit them today. We knocked Schreiber out in the first inning. At that point we had achieved our goal of making it to the championship game.

The funny part is my dad said we should start someone else and I looked and told them “I love y’all but it’s not happening. I cannot do that to Makayli.” She’s our number one. She was 43-2, 1 save, 0.767 Earned Run Average in 283 innings and 576 strikeouts. I did not care how bad she was, she was starting the championship game and getting the first inning. Had she struck out the side she may have stayed but I knew she was gassed. She has a humble personality and we tried to challenge her during the season. During spring break, she walked three batters in a row and I quit calling pitches and it made her mad. I did that to make her communicate with me. She then argued with me at state, not wanting to come out of the game. Told her it’s not fair to her and it’s not fair to her to have to throw a potential 42 innings over two days. I’ll put you back in. Her only request was if we see we are going to lose this game, I want to lose the game on the mound. We went to Kiara Vandiver and then Bellah Hill. Then I went back to Makayli to not get run-ruled. I did not want them to get run-ruled in the championship game.

Question: Looking back now (one month later), how has your perspective changed on what y’all did this season?

Will Inman: We maxed out our potential. Could not be prouder of the girls. What we did was special. How they came together as a team and turned into competitors. They hated to lose more than they liked to win. That is hard to get a team to buy into. It started with the seniors. We had zero drama all season. Everyone knew their role. Leah Owens (senior) bought into just playing defense. Ella Jeffreys (senior) bought into just batting and not running the bases because we ran for her with Leah. I hope these young kids can learn from that. Yes, Hallie Holland, Harmonie McClain, and Makayli were great leaders but I also want them to look at Leah and Ella not being every inning players and how the attitude never changed.

Question: What would you have changed looking back now? If anything?

Will Inman: Not much I could change. Maybe a play here or there. Specifically (in the 2-0 game), maybe send Bellah Hill home when she was at third base even though she may have been thrown out because the ball bounced on throw and away from the third baseman. However, you do not want to make an out at home. Nothing sticks out about that. Winning the championship is about it.

Question: Would you change the pitching strategy next year? To throw a pitcher back-to-back 300+ pitches on consecutive days?

Will Inman: Not sure if it is possible to change due to the season structure. Spring Break would be the only chance to do it but you only play two games a day then.

Question: What did you learn from being in the Qualifier 1 and Qualifier 2 games the last two seasons (at Lawrence County) as a coach that benefitted you this season?

Will Inman: Pressure got to those teams a little but that is on me because of the tournaments we play in putting them in tough games all season. I do that to put us in those spots. We talked about area, regionals, and state all season long. Starting in March, we began to break down the three steps of the postseason (area, regional, state). During Spring Break we went to Murfreesboro, TN and began to key in towards the postseason then. We talked about the pressure, noise, atmosphere, etc. We also played in seven tournaments this season and were in five championship games, winning four. That mattered a lot to be in a bracket environment, multiple games a day, playing close low-scoring games. Regionals we had a tough draw, Mars Hill was better than the record indicated

Question: How did y'all break each step down? (Area, Regional, State)

Will Inman: Coach Allen did a great job scouting for me. He'll send pictures, videos, etc all the time. The most loyal guy that has been with me. Scouting gave us an edge all season, especially postseason. My dad is an assistant with us and he goes to Montgomery to watch St. James in their area tournament before regionals began. We had the information, data, etc. I'm an analytics person. We prepared them as well as we could. I will find a loophole in the rules, an edge, stat, etc. We are going to do it.

Question: The state tournament schedule shifted from Oxford to Jacksonville State University overnight (due to inclement weather). What was your first thought, as a coach, when you heard the move and had less than ten hours notice?

Will Inman: I did not like it selfishly because the state tournament is at Choccolocco Park (Oxford, AL). Your goal is to play on Signature Field. I felt like that was taken away from our girls. At the same time, Jacksonville State has a great facility. I feel like it dampered our crowd a little bit. I do not think it upset the girls, but we came down a day early (Wednesday) just to walk through Choccolocco and take them to see Signature Field. We let them watch half of the 5A Championship Game. Then that was all they talked about in our team meeting Wednesday night. The way our schedule was set up we (3A) were the only class playing on Friday and it would all be on Signature Field. Our goal was to get to day two. We preached control what you can

control. You cannot control the weather or what the state does. Looking back, I wish we could have got the opportunity to play on Signature Field.

Question Part I: What advice would you give to any coach making their first trip to Regionals, Qualifier 1/Qualifier 2 game, State? Or maybe for getting out of the Area Tournament?

Question Part II: What advice would you give any coach who has been in those spots and come up short to get over that hump?

Will Inman Part I: Prepare your team to the best of your ability from practice, mentality, scouting. You need to know your opponent as well as you know your team. At a certain point in the season, we quit working on weaknesses and worked on strengths as a team trying to perfect them. Weaknesses should be dealt with in the offseason, in my opinion. Play to and focus on your strengths to be able to execute them as perfectly as possible. Plus, find an assistant that knows you better than you know yourself and handles things you do not want to handle

Will Inman Part II: Similar to part one, comes down to players and matchups. Potentially more mental over physical. Players making plays and being prepared mentally.

Question: What drew you to the Colbert County Softball Head Coach Job?

Will Inman: Short answer, location. Had a chance at the Albertville job and it appealed as a 7A program, nice facilities, and the pay (laughingly). Timing was not there for me and my family because I would have had to live there during the season. A parent called me shortly after leaving Lawrence County. I did not know him at all. He began with "Hey Coach, I'd like for you to think about taking the Colbert County job." I laughed and thought, "Why there?" He then followed saying with the right person we can probably be alright. He continued with how they need to be put in the right spots, we can be pretty good. I then asked about some of the players. I knew about Hallie and Kylee (Holland) because I had seen home runs. He then begins to tell me about his player. I then ask what was the record in 2025, he goes 18-17. I stopped and said she cannot be that good. I then thought I made him mad. He then goes on telling stories and then about 45 minutes later we end the call. I then tell my wife "this guy is a nut." He wants me to put in for this job and I began to think this is a guy hyping up his kid. I then told her "this guy has lost his mind." I want the parents to have realistic goals wherever I go. At the same time I did not know if I could deal with this guy.

The next day, I did apply because it was close in location. I then went back to gamechanger. This goes back to scouting while at Lawrence County. I was scouting East Lawrence in 2025. They were playing Colbert County and I thought that was the only pitcher close to what we had at Lawrence County. My brain got to rolling and I said let me go look at that player. I had told Coach Allen at one point. "I do not know if we can hit her." She went the complete game

allowing one hit, one walk, and 15 strikeouts in a 9-0 win versus East Lawrence. I could tell on video that her velocity was low 60s (compares to low 90s in baseball). I called him back a couple days later and asked him what her velocity was. He said in-season it is probably low 60s. I said, alright I can live with that. A week passed and they offered me the job and I did not take it right away. It was the absolute best decision I could have made. Even after I took it I was still uneasy. I had other coaches calling me telling me I was crazy, I had committed career-suicide. Now, I want to call them back and say a state championship game appearance (laughingly). It was a God thing as far as putting me in the right spot at the right time with the right group of girls, right administration and the right parents. Parents knew their role better than the girls did at times. We had zero parent issues all season. Parents had realistic expectations for their kids. All that combined is why we went 51-10 and made the championship game. The phone call almost turned me away from the job, but it made my brain start thinking and looking at videos. I knew I would have a pitcher/catcher combo, less than a 30 minute commute. I know it's 3A with private schools, but we have a chance to be okay. Did not think we would win 51 games. I thought 35 wins was reasonable with that combo.

Question: Coach Lee Allen was an assistant at Lawrence County for Coach Inman, Coach Inman got to bring Coach Allen to Colbert County. What did that mean for you?

Will Inman: It meant everything because he knows my system and terminology. He knows what I'm thinking plus handles what I do not want to handle. He could give the girls a heads up if I was about to lose my mind on a day. He could diffuse the situation quickly. He's great with kids because he's the good guy. It's like I'm the bad cop and he's the good cop.

Question: What would you change about your next trip to the state tournament?
(Off-Field)

Will Inman: Stay at a different hotel first off. We had a bad experience as some of our parents and players did not get into their rooms until 9:00pm the night before we played. Check-in time was 3:00pm. Some of our crew went to a different hotel. However, that is another thing we could not control. They all did a great job of not letting it bother them. It did bother me though for the first two hours trying to work it out. Once again, Coach Allen told me to go on to eat with the team meal and he would come later as he handled the hotel situation. He knew I was about to lose it.

We are not going to change going down a day early, practice somewhere different, team meals, go see the games going on. At that point, I want it to be a memorable trip for the girls. People do not realize how hard it is to make it there. I have had coaches call me since the season ended congratulating me and all said people do not realize how tough it is to make it there. My expectation is to be there every year, but you are always one thing away from not making it.

Question: What was the biggest challenge of the state tournament? (Not Counting Weather)

Will Inman: We dealt with a couple of injuries before we got to Oxford. Just late season ailments.

Question: Y'all played in several out of town tournaments that required overnight stays this season? What was the intention/purpose of those? Do you think it helped at state?

Will Inman: My schedule is always made to go out of town once or twice based on my team and our finances. I go out of town to prepare for the state tournament and to be out of our comfort zone. However, with travel ball nowadays it is second nature but I want to do it with our school team to prepare for the postseason.

Question: Who kept up with all the reservations? Planning? Etc.

Will Inman: Coach Lee Allen. He does a ton behind the scenes that people do not realize. It is something I could do, but I do not like to do and he understands that.

Question: The State Tournament began on dirt fields at Oxford and ended on turf at Jacksonville State. How did y'all prepare for that possibility?

Will Inman: We had prepared by having them bring the footwear needed. You never know what can happen when you get there. I think we're better defensively on dirt because they were more comfortable with that. We played our worst defensive day since early March or February on day two of the state tournament and it was on turf. That's not why we lost, it could have been pressure, wear and tear of a 60+ game season, etc.

Question: How did the school respond despite it being the end of the school year?

Will Inman: Energy was high and great the whole time. I had thought administration had jinxed us at first moving graduation. The support was crazy good. Coach Oscar Bonds (football coach) came to the state tournament. Multiple teachers came as well. Principal Charles Beene came to the state tournament. Colbert County Schools Superintendent Nathan Fuller came down both days and watched every inning of each game.

Question: The state tournament was scheduled a week later than usual with it ending on the Friday of Memorial Day weekend. That is usually graduation week across the state. Numerous schools were affected whether postponing, moving dates, moving times back ten minutes so a team could arrive, etc. Colbert County moved graduation from Thursday

May 21(day one of the state tournament) to Tuesday May 19 in April. When did you approach the administration about the potential conflict? What was their response?

Will Inman: I always look at prom and graduation as a softball coach. I had a coach tell me not to schedule anything prom weekend. We try to play Monday and/or Tuesday of prom week then they are off for the week. Graduation is typically after the season, but I knew this season was a week later for some reason. I knew in October the potential conflict could arise. I began to look at times and thought there is no way if we play three games on day one there is no way they are getting back. Colbert County's games were scheduled for 9:00am, 12:30pm, 4:00pm (Colbert County High School is an average of 155 miles from Choccolocco Park depending which route you take). I did not want to say anything yet. I then told my assistants we can be pretty good. We came back from Christmas break and I talked to Principal Charles Beene and asked if he knew that graduation was day one of our state tournament, but we may or may not make it there. I then said we're going to be pretty good. He then said we'll look at it and I'll talk with Superintendent Nathan Fuller. We come back in the middle of March and then players and parents begin to realize the conflict. At this point we are like 25-6 or whatever. I then begin weekly discussions with Mr. Beene talking about graduation and the state tournament. We had then played our area opponents at least once each. I then said we're going to have a chance. Unless something goes way wrong. Mr. Beene had told me all school year you're going to be in the state championship game. Fast forward to early to mid April and Mr. Beene tells me we are going to move it. My thought was that a month out is better than moving it two or three days before. I understand invitations, reservations, etc. Thank You to our administration and superintendent for moving it up.

Question: St. James had a perfect game for 7.2 innings during the 2-0 game vs Colbert County. What did you keep telling your team to keep them in the game?

Will Inman: Pregame, I had said one run wins the game. I knew both pitchers were really good. If we would have scored first I would have said we need two, three and so on. At that point of the year if I have to keep them in the game it's a problem. My thing was to stay positive. Side story here: Shortstop Creleigh Gargis injured her foot in her first at-bat of the Glenwood game (opening round game). I could not tell a difference in her performance both days. She played great versus Glenwood and Hanceville. She then takes three hits away from St. James or we may get beat 1-0 in seven innings. She makes two plays covering ground on the other side of second base. Coach Allen's scouting had her in the right spot but she still had to make the plays. If I could have got her on base in that game I could have had her steal second base, bunt her over to third and then squeeze bunted her home. She kept us in the game with Makayli's pitching but our run game was stalled because we could not get on base.

Question: What did you tell them postgame, after the St. James 2-0 game?

Will Inman: Creleigh thought she lost the game for us. She did not. (Creleigh had a chance to make a double play in the bottom of the 8th with one out. Groundball to Bellah Hill at second base. Bellah flipped it to Creleigh and the throw to first was wide. Would have ended the inning and went to the 9th 0-0). I told them postgame that it is on me as a coach. Creleigh was beside herself postgame. Everyone thought it was about the throw to first. It was not about the throw. She felt like she was not in the right spot before the pitch. She may not have been but that is not her fault. It is on us as coaches. I'm never going to fault a kid for trying to make a play. Especially one who had given me 110% every play all year. After that game I'm trying to get her mind right. I told the team go eat, go rest, get off your feet, go to the hotel pool, etc. Do not think about softball tonight because I need you laser-focused tomorrow morning to win one game to get back to the championship game. They were in the best spot possible for how they played day one.

Question: When and How did you learn about her (Creleigh's) injury?

Will Inman: First inning of the game, She gets on base with a hit versus Madison Academy and then steals second base. She comes off after scoring and says "I need a trainer." I said "for what?" She says "my ankle." I thought nothing of it since she had been getting it taped the last few weeks and I asked her if she was good. She said "I'm good. I'm not coming out of the game." I said "okay." We play another inning and the trainer is in the dugout. I hear the trainer say "What is that?" I then look over while on the field coaching third base. Creleigh looks at me and says "go back and coach third." I said "you alright." She said "I'm not coming out of this game. They can cut it off, I'm not coming out of the game. I'll deal with it next week." I said yes ma'am. The top of her foot was black. We then find out a week later that she had fractured her foot and tore two tendons. She had played through that for three plus games and continued to finish the game versus Madison Academy and then St. James. She did not want me to change how I coached her and she wanted to win. That is an example of what this team had been all year. No one wanted any special treatment for injuries.

Question: During the 1-0 Hanceville game, Makayli struck out the first 20 outs of the game. Did anyone realize it until the game was over.

Will Inman: I did not know it until after the game. My assistants give me a hard time because I call pitches. Some of that is on Coach Allen because he charts pitches as I call pitches. Ella (Jeffreys) is beside me with scouting reports on the opposing hitters while Coach Allen is on the other end of the dugout controlling defense and charting pitches. We got luck because about the fifth inning we stopped throwing rise balls. We went to fastball only trying to save energy. Had I known we were at 20, we would have went back to more rise balls to try and get the 21st strikeout.

Question: Colbert County beat Glenwood and Hanceville 8-2 and 8-0 respectively. What did it mean to not play a close game until game three of day one?

Will Inman: I liked out draw better than regionals. I thought we were better than Glenwood and I thought Glenwood was better than Hanceville. I thought our second round game was going to be easier than our opening round game. Glenwood was similar to Winfield with weaker pitching than Winfield.

Question: During the semifinal game versus Madison Academy on day two. Madison Academy had runners on first and second with two outs trailing 12-11. They hit a bloop flyball in shallow outfield and Bellah Hill tracked it down to catch it ending the game. What did that moment feel like?

Will Inman: Relief and happiness for my girls. That let me know we did it. We got to this point. Seeing them celebrate and seeing the joy on their faces is why I do this. Makes it all worth it. I have had videos sent to me from all angles. I think I threw my clipboard like 60 feet in the air. It was a relief for me. Showing me how hard my staff and I had worked to put them in that spot.

Question: Colbert County played Madison Academy in the 1-0 game at Regionals the week before state. How did that game at regionals affect the game at state?

Will Inman: It was two different situations because we had an 11-day break before regionals (due to area scheduling). Both pitchers were sharper at regionals and I felt like one run would win that game. (Colbert County won 2-0) Pitchers were gassed at the state tournament.

Question: What records did this team break?

Will Inman: School record for wins was 28. We won 51. No fastpitch softball team had ever made it to state. First time winning an area tournament since 2012. First time hosting an area tournament in fastpitch. I'm sure we broke home runs, stolen bases, and strikeouts. I think we stole 252 bases. I do not care too much about all that. Not sure if we have anyone here that knows the records. Hallie Holland set the new mark for career home runs with 55 career home runs. Makayli Davis led the nation in the 2025-2026 school year with 576 strikeouts.

Question: How did it feel to have Makayli Davis and Hallie Holland as your pitcher/catcher combination?

Will Inman: I told Kyle Parmley (Starnes Media/4 Corners Softball Podcast) preseason "I think I have the best pitcher/catcher combo in the state or in North Alabama." I'd say top three or top five in the state after the season. I'm glad they were both on my team.

Question: Did you ever imagine you would coach the national strikeout leader? When did y'all realize she was leading the nation?

Will Inman: No. Probably mid-April is when it became more known. I did not really keep up with it. People began calling and talking. At that point we wanted her to maintain the lead. Second place was Haylee Moynier (Utah) with 373.

Question: What part of the season did y'all realize y'all could do something special?

Will Inman: I realized we had a chance coming back from Spring Break in Murfreesboro. We beat two really good pitchers (one going to Purdue and one going to UNA).

Question: Looking down the road, 5,10, 15, 20+ years from now. What will be the story of the 2026 Colbert County Indians Softball Team?

Will Inman: I think they will be remembered for making the championship game and 51 wins. I do not think people will remember stats except Makayli's because she led the nation in strikeouts. I want them to be remembered as the most competitive team I've ever coached. It is bleeding over into summer workouts. We are averaging 50+ female athletes in summer workouts where we averaged mid-20s last season. You can feel the excitement in all sports because of what softball did. The ones I have coming back on softball are hungry. I've not had to stay on them because they are not missing reps. They understand this is how we do it. This is how we are successful. The younger group understands it too. They are just as competitive as this team was.

Conclusion

This would make a great documentary or movie someday or even a great book. However, preseason if you had taken a poll statewide I do not think anyone would have expected this type of season. They only lost to two 3A teams, St. James and Lauderdale County. The other losses were 4A Madison County, 5A Hayden, 4A Curry, 5A Corner, 4A West Morgan, 2A West End, and out -of-state McNairy Central (TN). Of the losses only Lauderdale County was not in a tournament. West Morgan made the state tournament. Madison County, Curry, and West End made regionals.

Colbert County softball was put on the map this season and this 2026 team may be the start of what is a dynasty to come. However, every great dynasty started somewhere. Every great coach has that one season where it all or almost all comes together.

Zack Pounders,

Shoals Sports Report