

Flying into 5A: How Florence Hopes to Take Flight in 5A

Florence High School will see a first this season. They will play in 5A for the first time in school history and the first time since Bradshaw and Coffee were still open. They merged in 2004-05 to create Florence High School. They slide to 5A after being 7A the last eight seasons but think of it as the old 6A. The AHSAA created two new classes for private schools this offseason, which led to public schools being grouped 1A-6A. 6A is now the largest school in the state (ex: Hoover, Thompson, Bob Jones, etc.). 5A is now the next group (Florence, Muscle Shoals, Hartselle, etc.) and so on. Florence will be the largest 5A in the state, averaging around 345 students per grade. The smallest 6A, Buckhorn, averages around 347 students per grade.

The new region for Florence can be described with a few words, but one word we'll use is fun. The new 5A region is Athens, Austin, Decatur, East Limestone, Hartselle, Muscle Shoals, Russellville, and Florence. By that list alone, you can see some familiar opponents and some they have not played in a while. Muscle Shoals will be a region game for the first time since 2017. They have not played Russellville since 2011. Florence has not played Athens, Decatur, or Hartselle since 2017 when Florence was last in 6A. East Limestone will play a Florence City school for the first time, as they never played Bradshaw or Coffee nor Florence. Austin comes down to 5A with Florence. Austin has played Florence every season since 2004 (Florence's first season). "We're excited about the realignment. We had been 32 out of 32 (being the smallest 7A in the state). We're now 33 (largest 5A in the state)." Coach Kenny Morson said about the new region. Athens is the second largest 5A, but they average 338 students per grade. East Limestone will be the smallest 5A, averaging around 173 per grade. Florence is now in the opposite boat they were in with 7A. Auburn was the largest 7A the last two years, averaging 739 per grade where Florence was the smallest 7A, averaging 365 per grade. Florence had been on the bubble of not being a 7A the last two realignment cycles.

Coach Morson went on to talk about his time at Decatur as an assistant for 20+ years, and they would joke, calling this region "SEC North." Of the eight teams in the region, six made the playoffs last season (all but East Limestone and Decatur). Of the six that made it, only Hartselle, Russellville and Muscle Shoals won a playoff game. Muscle Shoals made the semifinals. However, due to retirements and other opportunities, Russellville and Muscle Shoals will have new head coaches. "It did not get any easier; it probably got tougher." Coach Morson added. He also hopes that with the games being more local teams, it will fill the stands more.

Florence had a preview of this region last season when they were in a four-way tie for a region championship with Bob Jones, James Clemens, and Sparkman. Florence thought if they won their final game of the season, they would win the region and host a playoff game. However, Sparkman decoded the tiebreakers and won the region. Florence was then the four-seed and had to travel to Mobile to play Baker. Coach Morson noted that the game created mental toughness

for the team and that it was a \$27,000 tiebreaker, as the buses and hotel rooms cost a good bit. Florence traveled to Mobile on Thursday and stayed overnight. Coach Morson added that when that happened, the players said, “Coach, we’re in the playoffs, we don't care who we are playing. Let's load up and go.” He noted how they handled it better than he did because they probably did not know how much money went into that trip.

Florence has seen the players take a step this offseason in the weight room. Strength and Conditioning Coach Kevin Sledge has come in and helped the players with nutrition. Coach Morson mentioned how the average weight gain has been 9-10 pounds per player this offseason. The players have taken a step as well in helping each other stay accountable.

The new region is tough, but the excitement is high around Florence High School right now. In the last year due to retirements, they have hired a new Athletic Director (Myra Miles) and Superintendent (Bill Hopkins). Superintendent Hopkins is a former head football coach at West Morgan. Coach Morson has known him for years. Coach Miles has history up here as well, as she led Brooks to a softball state championship in 1994. Coach Morson noted how Coach Miles was one of the first hires made by the new Superintendent. Tim Bowens (former Brooks head coach) comes in as an assistant athletic director as well.

With the changes in the office, Florence is also now the sole tenant of Braly Stadium, with UNA moving to Bank Independent Stadium. The former athletic director (Byron Graham) and superintendent (Dr. Jimmy Shaw) got the plans moving on some of the changes being made to Braly. Florence will have the opportunity to paint the turf at Braly after the 2026 season, with Florence logos on the field and Florence in the end zones. They are also building a new middle school fieldhouse at Braly that will be open for the 2027 season. Florence is also taking steps to make it more intimate at Braly by tarping off the top sections of the stadium and moving the crowd down towards the field.

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