

If It Is Not Broke, Do Not Fix It: How Muscle Shoals and Coach Darden are Continuing the Standard

The toughest coaching job in the Shoals this year may not be where you think it is. It may be at Muscle Shoals as Head Coach Michael Darden takes over after Coach Scott Basden retired after 18 seasons. Coach Darden has been around the program for what will now be his fifth season and his 19th overall season of coaching. “Being a head coach has always been a goal of mine. Muscle Shoals is different. The standard that has been set (under Coach Basden) over the last 18 years. I’ve been to other places where it’s not the same. The biggest appeal to me was that and the community.” Coach Darden said about what made the job appealing.

Muscle Shoals has not changed much this offseason, as Coach Darden has been there for years. “If it’s not broke, don’t fix it,” he added. He said they may change small things like warmups and things in the weight room, but nothing major. “To me, if it’s worked the past 18 years, I’m not going to come in and change it,” he also added.

Coach Darden is not the only new thing about Muscle Shoals this season. They return to 5A for the first time since 2013 and bring some familiar faces with them as well as renew some old rivalries. The “new 5A” will feature the following from 6A last season: Athens, Decatur, Hartselle. Then the newcomers feature Austin, Florence, East Limestone, and Russellville (despite being 5A since 1984). However, with 7A dissolving, Austin and Florence come down from 7A. This new region means for the first time since 2017 Florence-Muscle Shoals will be a region game. There are no new opponents on the schedule, but the last time they played Russellville and East Limestone was in 2013. Coach Darden added that he has heard stories from other coaches and former players about the old Russellville games.

The game that has defined the last several seasons is Hartselle, and that game slides up to mid-September this season. The players do not care where they are on the schedule and mentioned how it is always a fun game. Coach Darden added, “You don’t have to get them up for it. I don’t think it being earlier in the season will matter too much.”

Muscle Shoals will open the season on the road at Hoover. Coach Darden talked about how hard it is to get games in this part of the state because they are one of the bigger schools. The schedule was made before Coach Basden retired, and he had put Coach Darden over scheduling. Hoover’s coach reached out. After some communication with Muscle Shoals staff, it was set. “It’ll be a great opportunity to go play at the Hoover Met. It’s great to play games like that early where it will be a playoff-type game/playoff feel. It’s a unique place to play high school football.” Coach Darden added.

One name that has been around the program is back as well. Smothers. Muscle Shoals has brought Shane Smothers (former head coach at various programs) back as an assistant coach plus his two youngest sons, Lincoln and Ledger, coming in with him. You may remember the name as Logan Smothers (2019 All-State) and then went and played college football at Nebraska before finishing at Jacksonville State. Lincoln does not see it as pressure coming back to Muscle Shoals, but he sees it as people to look up to. The other players welcomed them back and knew the faces/names before, so it's nothing too new.

Coach Darden hopes his first year is successful. If they make the playoffs, he will be the first head coach since Cody Keene in 1999 to make the playoffs. He can make history if they win a playoff game as the first head coach to make the playoffs and win a playoff game in year one in program history. Coach Basden entered a program that was coming off six straight losing seasons. Coach Darden enters a program that is coming off 17 straight winning seasons. "If it is not broken, why fix it?"

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