

Shoals Sports Report 2026 Final Four Preview



Photos Courtesy: Bo Starkey/Average Joe's Sports Talk

The calendar has turned to one of the best months on the sports calendar (March). We all know the phrases around this month, as it has become a cultural phenomenon. March Madness or The Big Dance, or maybe you know it as One Shining Moment (the highlight package and song at the end of the tournament). Before we get to the madness, we will see 14 champions crowned in Birmingham at Legacy Arena, March 2-7, 2026.

This season, the Shoals are sending three teams to the Final Four. Three schools that are very familiar with this time of year. Mars Hill girls, Lauderdale County boys, and Deshler boys are the last three standing. Lauderdale County and Deshler are normally here with the girls' programs, but this is the sixth and ninth appearance for each, respectively. Mars Hill is making its 12th appearance on the girls' side. We will recap each season and preview each team this week, proceeding in game order, starting with the ladies from Mars Hill.

Mars Hill (28-4): “Not Satisfied with Sweet Sixteen, Elite Eight”

“We’re not happy with Sweet 16, we’re not happy with Elite Eight. I counted 25 banners in our gym at Mars Hill, and not a single one of them say anything but state champions. We don't have Sweet 16 banners, Final Four banners. They are not all basketball; they are not all girls' basketball, whether it's football, baseball, softball, etc. It is what we expect at Mars Hill,” Coach Cophia Rutherford stated postgame after beating Lauderdale County to advance to the Final Four. Each coach at Mars Hill echoes that same sentiment. She went on to say, “We would have been crushed if we had lost that game. We worked for 365 days for that game.” Mars Hill even went as far as for practice between the Sweet 16 and Elite Eight to put the score of last season’s loss to Lauderdale County on the scoreboard each day. “I think they had the game won before we stepped on the court today.” Coach Rutherford added

Last season, Mars Hill fell to eventual State Champion Lauderdale County 65-59 in the Sweet Sixteen round at Wallace State. A rare early exit for one of the powerhouse programs in the northwest part of the state. Then, star freshman Belle Hill had 43 of the 59 Mars Hill points. Now she is a sophomore and arguably the leader of the team on the floor. The rest of the Panthers scored 16 points that game. This season, Belle has more help, more scorers than can get points when needed. Mars Hill scored 139 points in two games this year at regionals. Belle had 73 of the points; the rest of the team scored 66. She is surrounded by three versatile players in Mia Humphries, Molly Wright, and newcomer Evan Ann Bowling. There are also Briley Durham and Lila Embry, who contribute as well. However, this season is Belle and company. Not just Belle.

The big question around the Shoals has been how do you stop Belle? Coach Carla Clemons (Lauderdale County Girls HC) said after their Sweet 16 win, “If I knew that, I’d be rich.” You almost have to accept that she is going to get 25 points and 10 rebounds per game and hope she has a bad shooting night. She has had very few games under 20 points all season, and even those games, she still had anywhere from 17 to 19 points. My thought is that if 20 points is your “bad” game, then I would hate to see your best game. Belle has had numerous 20 and 30

point games all season. She has played three games at regionals as a Freshman or older, and her low is 32 (vs Lauderdale County this season). Safe to say the lights will not be too bright for her at Birmingham.

There is also a very unique family connection on this team. Belle Hill is the granddaughter of head coach Cophia Rutherford. Rutherford also got to coach her daughter (then Mamie Rutherford) at Hatton in the early 2000s, so now it has come full circle for all three. “To get to share something so special as this with her... words do not describe that.” said Rutherford about getting to coach her granddaughter. She went on to talk about how she and her husband Dexter Rutherford (Principal at Mars Hill) coached most of the current varsity team since second and third grade when they were in TVBA (Tennessee Valley Basketball Association). Coach Rutherford realizes the uniqueness and blessing that comes with having had the unique chance to coach her daughter and granddaughter. We see so many coaches get to coach their own children, but you rarely see them get to coach grandchildren.

“It’s made all the difference in the world,” said Rutherford, talking about the other players producing this season. She also attributed the age and experience they gained from last season to this season, noting how Belle and Mia were freshmen, and Molly Wright was a sophomore. Crediting them for taking Lauderdale County to the brink. Mia had a double-double versus Holly Pond (14 points, 10 rebounds) and nearly had one versus Lauderdale County (16 points, 8 rebounds). Molly had 10 points versus Lauderdale County. That is 26 of the remaining 39 points not scored by Belle in that game.

The Panthers have not had to face too much adversity all season as they enter the Final Four at 24-8. The four losses came to two teams at Birmingham (Marion County -1, Good Hope -10) and two Sweet 16 teams (Deshler -10, West Morgan -8). Also of note, only West Morgan was a true road game. However, Lauderdale County possibly figured out how to stop Belle, foul trouble. “We’ve not had to play with her in foul trouble all year,” said Coach Rutherford. Belle had four fouls with 7:00 to play. Rutherford then goes on to say how that limits her offensively because of the fear of a charge foul, and then she has five and is out of the game. Mars Hill tried to roll her in and out of the game on offense and defense, trying to protect her. Coach Rutherford said she told her, “If you get stuck, give up two points.” Coach then credited Belle’s basketball IQ and maturity in that situation. Stating how Belle knew the situation and how much basketball she had played.

Lauderdale County did not go quietly despite being down by double digits at halftime. “I knew it would get tight. They are not going to quit,” said Coach Rutherford about Lauderdale County’s second-half surge. She then noted how Mars Hill started playing not to lose rather than to win. Mars Hill led by 14 at the end of the third quarter. That lead shrank to five late in the fourth. However, Mars Hill was able to withstand and hold them off.

A common trend at most small schools are multi-sport athletes. Mars Hill girls' basketball is no different. Molly Wright has been named to the all-state softball team three years straight. Briley Durham was on the softball team last season when they went to the state tournament.

Evan Ann Bowling has been on the soccer playoff teams lately. Belle has numerous D1 offers already. Coach Rutherford summed them up in one word: “Competitors.” She went on to say, “They know what it takes to win.”

Coach Rutherford has been here before as a head coach and assistant. This will be her seventh Final Four (four with Hatton, three with Mars Hill), but her first as the head coach at Mars Hill. She has also won two championships as a head coach with Hatton (2002, 2004). This is Mars Hill girls' third final four in four seasons. She did not give any thoughts on St. James aside from the fact that they are good.

St. James enters with a record of 31-4 with wins over Hillcrest-Tuscaloosa (Elite Eight), Moody (Final Four), Trinity (2025 4A Champion), and Montgomery Catholic (Final Four). They have three in-state losses: Hoover (Final Four and 5-time defending champion), Hazel Green (Final Four), and Scottsboro (2025 5A Champion). This is mostly the same team that had Lauderdale County down 18 points in the 3rd quarter last season in the championship game. You can argue that this will be the state championship game on Tuesday at 9:00am at Legacy Arena, as they have both been ranked in the top three most of the season.

Lauderdale County (26-5): Be a Small Part of Something Big

Lauderdale County is back in the final four, but its boys, not the girls. A rarity in Rogersville, but they are still all on board. Coach Whitney Owens and his team have run through this entire season only losing to a Final Four team, an Elite Eight team, and a Sweet 16 team in Deshler, East Lawrence, and Brooks, respectively. The common trend is all above 3A.

One key to their run is that he has tried to keep it as normal and calm for the guys. “To not make it too big,” said Coach Owens. He then attributed how loose his guys have been and noted how they may have played two of their better games there. His message to the guys will be “Keep playing hard. Keep playing loose.”

The Lauderdale County boys have not been to the Final Four since the 2020 season. So no current player has experienced this so far. However, they shot 45% or better in both games at regionals. Coach Owens attributed that to practicing at different gyms before they got to Wallace, such as UAH, Athens High School, and more, to get different looks. They are going to practice at Samford on Monday to get a different look before the arena. He then attributed that to the guys getting open shots. “We’re one of those teams if we see it go in early, then we will hit a lot of shots,” he also added.

This year's boys team is similar to last season's girls team at Lauderdale County as it is not all on one person to carry the team. Numerous guys have scored 10+ points per game and led the team in scoring each night. Calvin Watkins, Jayden Sears, Easton Hammell, Connor May, Asa Butler, and more. “It’s a blessing to have more than one that can score because when the target is on one guy, and you’ve got to get him going it adds pressure.”

We talked to Jayden Sears, Calvin Watkins, and Connor May as well. “It feels good to be in the final four, not a lot of freshmen make it this far,” said Jayden. Connor added that he does his part “just doing what you gotta do.” Calvin echoed Connor in saying Coach kept saying “do what you do.” Jayden noted he expected to win, but not as badly as they did. Calvin said, “Coach said the only team in our way was us. They all three added that there was no extra excitement in beating a local team.

Despite the impressive record, it becomes more impressive when you realize they have beaten Brooks as well. The only two they played twice were Brooks and Deshler. They lost to Deshler by one and by three. So in theory, they got one of the losses back versus Brooks. “It helps to play good competition,” said Coach Owens. They had a chance to win both games against Deshler. “You have to be in those tight situations to learn how to finish games,” he also added.

Rogersville loves basketball. “They love the girls, they love the guys,” said Coach Owens. “I wish we were both there this year. Coach (Carla) Clemons was one of the first ones to see me after the game and congratulate me.” He also added. It has also come full circle for Coach Owens now, from playing for Lauderdale County, to being an assistant coach, to being the head

coach, and in the Final Four. “I’m blessed to have an opportunity to coach these guys and have an opportunity to play in the final four.

One special element of this team is the family angle. Coach Owens has one son on the team, Brady Owens (junior), and his wife, Melia, does the book for the team. “It’s a family deal when you are a coach...we’re in the gym together, and we’re at home together, so we see a lot of each other. We’re all in this together. My wife has been there since day one, she’s been the bookkeeper since I started coaching...You could not ask for more.” Coach Owens said. Coach Owens also added that he has coached the juniors since they were in kindergarten.

That is not the only family connection for the boys' team. The other is assistant coach Brett Sinyard (son of the late Coach Larry Sinyard). Coach Larry Sinyard is now the namesake for the gym at Lauderdale County. Coach Larry Sinyard passed in 2021, but Brett is hoping to add to the legacy of the Sinyard name with his own championship ring. Brett’s nieces, Madison and Kenzie Mobley, were on the 2025 Girls Championship team. Brett’s sister, Alana Mobley, nee Sinyard, was on the 1998 Championship team, coached by Coach Larry Sinyard.

Oh wait, there is one more Assistant Coach Weston Bowling is the half brother of Mars Hill girls player Evan Ann Bowling. Very cool experience Tuesday for them to get to be a part of the final four together as well.

This run began last season, though for Lauderdale County. They lost in the area tournament to Rogers and missed the playoffs for the first time since 2016. “That was a rally cry that night. I told them all you guys in this room. We’re going to make a run in the next few years. There are people in this room that will have the opportunity to play in the final four. Maybe win a state championship....Buy into being a small part of something big,” Coach Owens told the team after the area loss to Rogers.

Coach Owens then attributed the success of the other programs and how it spills over to other programs. “When we start football in August, and they have a good run, it carries the whole year,” said Coach Owens. He then added how when you start doesn't matter as much as when you end it. “No one remembers the start of the season; they remember the end.”

Montgomery Academy is the opponent for Lauderdale County. They won 3A boys last season but lost a lot of size from that team. Coach Owens said if they can defend and get open shots, they (Lauderdale County) will have a chance. However, Lauderdale has multiple scorers, and they all hope to be a small part of something big.

Deshler (24-7): Survive and Advance

The last Shoals team to take the floor on Tuesday will be another Tiger team, but these are from Tuscumbia. Deshler boys basketball is back in the final four for the second time in three seasons after escaping West Morgan to advance. They are the lone team from the Shoals to make it to state without winning their area tournament or regular season championship.

Improbable. Would be a proper word to summarize this run for Deshler. While their record is 24-7 it comes with a lot of ups and downs along the way. They began the calendar year with a one-point loss to Hatton at home, which sunk their area record to 1-3 and gave a major knock to any chance of hosting the area tournament. Coach Brian Pounders talked about that game simply because they did not play as hard as they should have. He mentioned how they went back and watched film and told the team, "If you had run back hard one time instead of jogging, you would have gotten the stop." He then added how when they (players) see it on film, they realize it is not just talk, but they can see where it mattered. Deshler would finish 4-4 in area play and as the 3-seed. They would then avenge the Hatton loss eleven days later, beating Hatton by 20 at Hatton. Then, in the area tournament, they beat Hatton by four to make the playoffs.

4A Area 14 this season can be summed up as not for the faint of heart. Deshler was the 3-seed in the area. They beat Hatton and then lost to Brooks for the area championship. Coach Pounders noted how brutal the area was this season. Ten of the twenty area games were decided by 10 or fewer points. Six of those 10 were decided by three or fewer points. Three of those six games were decided at the buzzer. Deshler was in four of the games decided by 10 or fewer points and on the losing side of two of the three decided by three or fewer points. Coach Pounders attributed to how good all five teams were this season despite records. He then describes how the eventual 5-seed Central beat the eventual 1-seed Brooks at the buzzer. "Our whole goal all year, we just want to get out of the area tournament," he said. "In my 14 years here, it was by far the most balanced area I've been a part of," he added.

Everyone knows the northwest part of the state is loaded with basketball talent. You get numerous top-10, top-5 matchups at Wallace every year. Coach Pounders attributed that in part to TVBA (Tennessee Valley Basketball Association) as well as the coaching has improved. The great part about that is you do not have to look far for competition each night on your schedule.

Physical. The word that changed the season for Deshler. Deshler has not lost to anyone but Brooks twice since they lost to Hatton by 1. "We got to be a little more physical and tougher there towards the middle and end of January, especially the Hatton game." Coach Pounders said. They emphasized rebounding and being tougher physically.

Being the 3-seed in an area tournament can be rough, but you have to be ready for anything. Coach Pounders said they did not have any concerns about being on the road for the area tournament for the first time in a while. Despite the different gym layouts of the Dome versus the county school gyms. He noted how if you play in one, then you've played in all of them, just with a different color paint. One of the main differences in the gyms is the proximity

of fans to the court. The dome is more apart from the court than the county gyms having fans inches from the court.

Despite losing the area championship to Brooks, Deshler was still alive and had win or go home road game at Fayette County to advance to Wallace. Coach Pounders gave Fayette credit, saying “they were the best 10-15 team in the state.” He continued to credit their student section for being behind the away bench. Deshler showed the team some film of Fayette to show the environment as well as strategy. Deshler wins that game on a defensive stand and advances to the Sweet 16.

Part of Deshler’s run is the players' and big game experience. Garrett Reid, Jalen Thirlkill, Jay Murner, Everette Minshew, and Dylan Morgan all have had big moments in other sports. Garrett and Jay were on the 2025 Baseball State Championship Team. Everette has won two individual tennis championships and was on the runner-up team last season. Jalen, Garrett, Jay, and Dylan were on the quarterfinalist football team last season. “They have been there and done that in big moments,” said Coach Pounders.

However, that is not the only key guys for Deshler. CJ Grant has stepped up as a sophomore. Kendrick Gunn off the bench has been a big help as well. Freshman Tyler Holmes has given some guys breathers or helped out when foul trouble arrives. Then you have the Caudle boys (Chase and Cruise, both sophomores). Chase Caudle had a few clutch free throws in the area tournament to help Deshler seal the win.

Now, we arrive at the elite eight, where it is Deshler-West Morgan for the 6th straight season in basketball playoffs. Deshler overcame a slow start and stepped on the gas in the second quarter as West Morgan then went cold. West Morgan went 9:00 without a FG from the end of the first quarter until under a minute to play in the first half. Deshler led by nine at halftime, and Coach Pounders said they told the team it is not over. Noting how West Morgan is too good not to make a run. The game was tied at the end of the third quarter. West Morgan goes ahead by four with 2:27 to play. The score is 47-43, West Morgan. West Morgan would not score again. Jalen Thirlkill has four straight points to tie the game. Then, West Morgan turns it over with :45 to play. West Morgan winds up with the ball again and a chance for the last shot. They make a pass, and Garrett Reid intercepts the pass, driving down the floor for a layup with time ticking down, and lays up a shot. “When I saw the pass being made and saw Garrett, I got a little happy,” said Coach Pounders. Foul is called. Garrett misses one free throw, makes the second. Deshler led 48-47. West Morgan would have five seconds to find a shot.

Let’s rewind for a minute. December 9th tiegame, Brooks at Deshler, around five seconds to play. Brooks’ Miles Warren runs the length of the floor and hits a game-winner. Deshler had one foul to give before Brooks would have shot free throws. They did not foul. They tried to foul but did not get the call.

Back to West Morgan, Deshler has a couple of fouls to give in this game before West Morgan would go to the line. Deshler does get the fouls called and resets West Morgan each time on the inbound. West Morgan gets a really good look at the basket. Jalen Thirlkill to the rescue with a block shot at the buzzer. Game over! Deshler wins? Deshler celebrates. We think. Is it a foul call, or is it the clock? Referees added 0.2 back to the clock. "I felt like it wasn't a foul. Assistant Coach Ty White watched it on film on the bus ride back and said it was clean. Now, with 0.2 seconds, it has to be a tip-in. 0.4 or less seconds has to be a tip-in. No chance for a catch and shoot. The inbound was far from the basket, clock expires. Deshler celebrates again, this time for real.

Fairfield Tigers will be the opponent that Deshler will see. So the Tigers will win, of course, but Deshler coaches went to Montgomery Tuesday to watch them in-person. Coach Pounders mentioned how they are big and athletic. He then said they told their guys, "You don't make the final four and play a nobody in 4A boys basketball." He then credited Fairfield head coach Maurice Ford for winning a couple of championships (2024 5A, 2020 5A).

Deshler also has family ties in this run. Coach Brian Pounders' dad, mom, and daughter are involved. Steve Pounders (dad) is an assistant coach. Teresa Pounders (mom) is the bookkeeper for the team. Presley Pounders (Brian's daughter) is one of the managers. Assistant Coach Michael Phillips' step-daughter, Jill Abrams, is one of the managers as well. Then you have three-sport star Garrett Reid, whose dad (Shane Reid) is also an assistant coach for the team.

Deshler, like Lauderdale County, is rare to see the boys make the final four without the girls. However, the Deshler boys have never played in a basketball state championship game. They are looking to make more history as well this season. Maybe the 9th time is the charm.

Conclusion (Tuesday Schedule+Friday Schedule)

Tuesday March 3

9:00am Mars Hill vs St, James (girls)

10:30am Lauderdale County vs Montgomery Academy (boys)

4:30pm Deshler vs Fairfield (boys)

Friday

12:30pm 3A girls

2:15pm 3A boys

5:45pm 4A boys

Zack Pounders
Shoals Sports Report