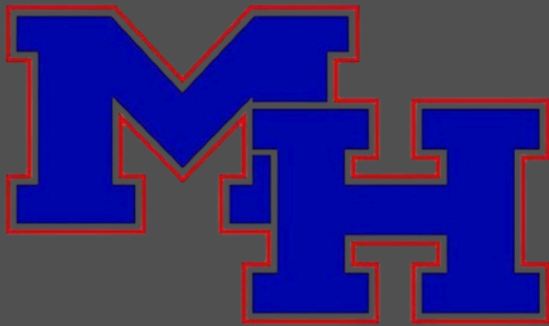


Sweet 16: 2A Baseball Championship Preview (Mars Hill vs Ariton)



2026 AHSAA BASEBALL CLASS 2A CHAMPIONSHIP MARS HILL VS ARITON



VS



30-10

32-8

GAME 1: MONDAY 4:00PM CHOCCOLOCCO PARK (OXFORD)
GAME 2: TUESDAY 10:00AM RUDY ABBOTT FIELD (JACKSONVILLE)
GAME 3 (IF NEC): TUESDAY 12:30PM RUDY ABBOTT FIELD (JACKSONVILLE)

This time of year, late May, can be stressful for a variety of reasons. Graduations, End of School, College Graduations, and playoffs. Mars Hill baseball will make its 16th appearance in the baseball state finals on Monday, just one day after the seniors graduate from Mars Hill. The three seniors on the baseball team (Luke Fowler, Braden Kachelman, and Beau Willis) will graduate on Sunday and have their final Mars Hill moment in the state championship series. You cannot script a better ending to your high school days.

It has not been easy for Mars Hill to get to this point in the season, though. They have had to face familiar opponents on their way here as well as familiar ones in the championship. Round one was a two-game, ten-inning (run-rule) sweep of Sand Rock (last playoff meeting 2006), then came Vincent for a third straight season, and it took three games to do it. Lindsay Lane was next; this would be the only unfamiliar opponent they would face in the playoffs. Once again, a game three was needed. Then came Red Bay for the third straight season and the second time in the three years in the semifinals. We will start with the Red Bay series. Mars Hill blitzed Red Bay from the jump. Leadoff walk turned into a single, and then an error and a 3-run home run made it 4-0 Mars Hill with no outs in the top of the first. Two of the next three batters would be outs, but then a couple of hits and a walk would lead to the next set of runs. The entire first inning took around 40 minutes to play, and Mars Hill led 11-1. Coach Josh Willingham said this, "I think what set the tone for that series was the first inning. I think it was unexpected by everybody." It was so rare that it had only happened once in MLB. The 2020 National League Championship Series between the Los Angeles Dodgers and Atlanta Braves saw the Dodgers put up 11 in the first inning.

Then, we rewind to the Lindsay Lane series. Lindsay Lane took a 1-0 series lead on Mars Hill in game one. Winning by the exact score of 1-0. In a game that saw five total hits. Beau Willis allowed two hits after he no-hit Vincent in Game One of Round Two. The run allowed was unearned after the batter reached on an error. Then came a sacrifice bunt, then a single that scored him. So, Mars Hill was behind the eight ball for the first time in the playoffs this season, needing to win game two or they would be eliminated. Enter Brooks Campbell, who also allowed two runs, but both were unearned. Mars Hill would lead 1-0 into the 5th before making it 2-0. Lindsay Lane answered, making it 2-1 in the 7th inning. An error allowed a runner to reach and a run to score, tying it at two. Then came the offense for Mars Hill. Cody Willis led off with a triple in the 8th. Noah Hanback then hit a home run that was later called a single. Willis would score the first of four runs in the extra inning. Mars Hill survived 6-2, forcing game three. "I think late in game two flipped the momentum in that series," said Willingham. Coach Willingham said this about game threes: "I think the third games benefit you, when you can win them, obviously you want to sweep the series, but when you have to grind it out and find a way to win, it builds a different belief in your team." He continued to say, "Game 3's are very stressful." Game three would have some stress for Mars Hill. The 2-0 lead was not safe after the first inning. Lindsay Lane answered with four in the second to make it 4-2. However, the offense would come alive for Mars Hill in the fourth and fifth innings. Scoring eight to make it 10-4. One more in the sixth made it 11-4. The final would be 11-6, but Mars Hill had to labor on the mound in game three. Freshman Carsen Wynn threw 1.2 innings, allowing four runs, only two earned, before Noah Hanback put the fire out and gave some length with three innings, only allowing a hit and striking out three.

We mentioned Beau Willis' no-hitter against Vincent in game one of round two. He did it on only 53 pitches in five innings due to the 11-0 lead. They carried that momentum into game two and jumped to a 1-0 lead in the first inning of game two. It would be 2-1 Mars Hill into the 6th before Vincent made a push, scoring four to force game three. Mars Hill would then win game three 9-1 with a five-run fifth inning to make it a 7-0 game.

Now, let's look at Ariton. Ariton comes in at 32-8 (only 7 losses in regular season) vs Mars Hill's 30-10 (only 8 losses in regular season). These two met in the 2024 championship series, and Ariton won in three games. Mars Hill lost game one, then won game two to force game three. Due to weather postponing Ariton's semifinal series, Coach Willingham went and watched game one and game two of the semifinal series. We asked how similar both teams were two years ago. Coach Willingham started by saying they are a very good team. He noted the catcher is the same as two years ago, senior Wells Ganey (Wallace-Dothan commit). He noted how he is their best hitter. "Ariton as a whole is a really good program that plays baseball the right way. Coach (Bob) Pickett is a really good coach. The players play hard and expect to win. "They really compete and have a lot of talent," Willingham added. Coach Willingham then said, as far as Mars Hill goes, "the formula remains the same: we have to pitch and play defense." Those are not optional...If we can do those things, I like our chances to be in the games and win at the end."

Mars Hill has seen Ariton this season on March 7th, winning 9-7 at a neutral site. Willingham said you can get an idea of what they are, but not really much on their pitching. He noted how early in the season you don't have your pitchers built up yet, and how both sides threw guys that probably will not start this series. Mars Hill started Noah Hanback, then went to Cole Agee and Cody Willis. "You take what you can get from that game."

Brooks Campbell pitched on March 6th, then missed some time with an injury. He returned on April 11th. Coach Willingham noted that they have had to face some of the adversity as a team this year, including the injury to Brooks. He attributed Brooks for still giving great performances despite not being 100%. Brooks is not the true "ace" for Mars Hill, but he will probably start game one or game two.

"Your goal in baseball is to be playing your best when it really counts." Coach Willingham said about his team lately. We then asked what Coach Willingham is going to tell his team on Monday before game one and Tuesday before game two. "I'm going to tell them to be themselves and compete like they always do. Tell them that they are prepared." He then quoted Derek Jeter. "The game slows down when you are prepared and speeds up when you are unprepared." He then said how he related to that "the only time I felt uneasy was when I was not prepared." He went on to say how baseball is a crazy game and "it's a round ball and a round bat. The ball bounces differently." He then noted how you have to make routine plays.

This will be the last time Mars Hill plays a public school for a championship due to the AHSAA's reclassifying and putting the private schools together for championship play. He noted the standard of winning and how they expect to win at Mars Hill. There are guys on this team

who have played on the last two football championship teams, as well as the final four basketball teams in 2025. Having that experience will be crucial for this team when it is a big moment, and they can just play the game.

Mars Hill has played any and everyone this season, whether it is 7A Sparkman, 6A Athens, 5A Russellville, 4A Brooks, 3A Lauderdale County, 2A Belgreen, 1A Sweet Water, to name a few, and more. They have won a game at each level when you count 7A Van Buren (Arkansas). "I think that's the reason you schedule those teams, so you can be prepared from a competition standpoint. Because you know you are going to play good teams in the playoffs. When you play the Russellvilles, Madison Academy, Sparkman, Van Buren (guys that are bigger), it does prepare you for this. Hopefully, it prepares us for the pitching we'll see because we are going to see two really good arms (vs Ariton).

Game one will be Monday at 4:00pm at Oxford's Choccolocco Park, and Games two and three will be Tuesday at 10:00am, then 12:30pm (if necessary) at Jacksonville State University baseball field (Rudy Abbott Field).

Zack Pounders

Shoals Sports Report