

The First Flag Football Season: 2026

Muscle Shoals Flag Football Preview

For the first time in a long time, the Shoals area will get to experience a new high school sport. The 2026-2027 school year will be the first year of high school flag football in the Shoals. We will see three teams in high school and two in college. Deshler, Florence, and Muscle Shoals will be the high school teams. UNA and Northwest-Shoals Community College will be the college teams. Flag is one of the fastest-growing sports in the nation and will be part of the 2028 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles.

The Basics

With a new sport comes new rules and layouts. So what do you need to know about flag football? Flag football season is from late August to the end of October. It basically runs the same as football season and playoffs in November, before State Championships are the first week of December. It is then played on Monday, Tuesday, and Thursday, so it will not interfere with football. The biggest difference comes in quarter length and field length. Flag plays four quarters of ten minutes apiece with a brief halftime (five or so minutes). So a game goes quickly and can be finished in an hour or less. The field length is 80 yards by 40 yards where football is 100 yards by 50 yards. So if they play on a normal football field, the end zone will be the 10-yard line, and the back line of the end zone will be the normal goal line. The sides will go to the bottom of the numbers that indicate ten, twenty, thirty, etc. You also play with seven on the field at a time rather than 11 like normal football. Think quarterback, receivers, running back, tight end only, as well as a center to snap the ball.

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What if flag football? When you ask Muscle Shoals, it is basically football with a few differences. Head Coach Emma James said, "For it to be no contact, there is some contact." Muscle Shoals is one of the three that will begin flag football this season. Muscle Shoals is excited not only for the high school aspect but the college level as well. Bryleigh Patton mentioned how it gives more opportunity to play at the college level. Coach James noted how everyone on the team plays multiple sports.

Bryleigh Patton can be attributed with the idea of it coming to Muscle Shoals. "I had heard some people at softball talking about it. I go to school the next day and talk to my science teacher about it. That teacher then went to Dr. Davis (principal), and he went to the board. From there, an interest form went out." Coach James added it was a survey that went out at the end of the 2025-26 school year. Muscle Shoals coaches will be Coach Emma James as the head coach and offensive coordinator then Coach Jill Green will be the defensive coordinator.

With all sports come challenges and advantages. Especially a new sport. One challenge they noted was pulling the flags. Then another major difference from football is that for first down, it is first and twenty, where football is first and ten. So for a first down, you need 20 yards to advance. Then the advantages are sport crossovers. Bryleigh mentioned how it helps with softball as a catcher. Promyse Burge mentioned how it can help with track speed. The girls noted how it is probably easier to tackle someone than pull a flag. Then how you can be at someone and they can shift their body to avoid you from pulling a flag. Prentiss Fowler mentioned how if the flags fall off, then it becomes a one-hand touch.

All sports can help translate into each other. Prentiss mentioned how on a punt return you can use communication from softball for a flyball. Audrey Southern, a tennis player, added how it helps with how you have to be there for the ball in tennis if you are on the other end of the court. Coach James added how it enhances athleticism.

Having multiple athletes playing multiple sports is not easy, but they have made it work at Muscle Shoals. “We have a facility big enough to have them work out together. The girls feed off the energy they all bring as well.” Coach James said. They have alternated times for practices with other sports so the girls are not having to pick and choose.

Coach James is familiar with the girls since she has coached them across volleyball, basketball, and softball for the last three years at Muscle Shoals. She has been at the middle school the last few years but now will transition to the high school and be in the weight room with her. She mentioned how it is a lot of learning for her and the players with a brand new sport. The players gave her credit for how much she knows already. Coach James also mentioned how some of the football assistants have hopped in to help with the learning. “Coach Zack Mize came in one day and showed us things on the whiteboard. That’s a credit to the football program as well. We know they know because it has been successful.”

Flag football is a fast turnaround sport, similar to basketball, so you do not have a week to gameplan at times; however, Muscle Shoals is ready for it. Coach James said, “We have already started filming practices. Then they will all have a HUDL account where the videos will be. We’ll have days just for film.” Muscle Shoals runs on a block schedule, so they have more time at the end of the day for film and practice to not be at the school all night.

The players have responded well so far. “They have come a long way since June 1.” Coach James added. Bryleigh added how the coaches have given grace in being patient because they are all learning. “I know for me, I like to be perfect at everything. It’s hard to learn to read everything.” Bryleigh added. She will also be the quarterback for Muscle Shoals, but she is also a catcher in softball. “It is similar because you see the whole field.” Coach James added how they had thrown football in softball practices to strengthen their arms, and she knew that when Bryleigh came out for flag that she would be the quarterback.

Muscle Shoals will carry 23 on their first team from grades 9-12. Due to the block schedule, they can have all the 9-12 at fourth block. Players will play both ways, Coach James added. The substitution rules will be unlimited like football.

Alabama is known for football. Most people grow up watching football from birth. Audrey Southern mentioned how she and her family watches Alabama every week, and now playing it has helped her. Coach James said, "Growing up in the South, they have watched it their whole life and now get to play." Leah Smith added how she can now play with her brother outside because she knows what is going on. Bryleigh and Prentiss added how they now get to see the thought process and how things develop.

The pregame for flag will be similar to baseball/softball. Coach James noted that since they have fourth block, they will have more time to prepare pregame off the field, but the warmups may begin 45 minutes before rather than an hour before.

Travel will be a factor in year one as Muscle Shoals region is Florence then schools around Athens and Huntsville. Coach James mentioned how they are used to traveling being a bigger school. Prentiss Fowler mentioned how they have seen people travel with them in the past in other sports. They also mentioned how social media will be used to promote games, success, etc. "All the females support each other here." Coach James added. Volleyball does crossover with the flag season, but there is not too much crossover where people will have to choose which game to go to. Volleyball plays earlier usually, and then flag is at 6:00, so there are ways to go to both.

Muscle Shoals hopes the local interest will be high with five teams local, three high school and two college. Prentiss Fowler said, "If you have not gotten the opportunity to play college for your main sport, trying something new is a big advantage. If you like it, you may want to do this in college." Coach James mentioned how some girls play travel ball, and the travel teammates may come watch, then go back to their school and try to get a team to help grow the sport

Conclusion

We encourage everyone in the Shoals to pick a game and go to it this season. Whether it is Florence, Deshler, or Muscle Shoals. Muscle Shoals will open their season at James Clemens on Thursday, August 27. The first home game for Muscle Shoals will be Tuesday, September 15 versus Tanner.

Zack Pounders,

Shoals Sports Report