

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



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

“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.

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