

Chelsea

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The year of THE HORNET

Chelsea sports teams experience unprecedented success



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BY LOYD MCINTOSH

Now that the 2024-25 school year has come to a close, it's the perfect time to reflect on the remarkable achievements of Chelsea High School's athletic programs. From unforgettable victories to standout individual performances, our athletes, coaches, and supporters have made this a year to remember.

It was a historic year for the Hornets, as multiple teams racked up record-setting wins, stormed through the playoffs like Patton's Third Army across Europe, and brought home more hardware than Papa Hemingway on safari.

Throughout the school year, Chelsea captured two state titles in women's track (indoor and outdoor), advanced to the state championship in baseball and girls' basketball, and made it to the final four in volleyball and soccer.

Chelsea High School Director of Athletics and Head Baseball Coach Michael Stallings said 2024-25 will go down as one of the best years ever. While he's thrilled with the results on the scoreboard, he's more proud of the manner in which the athletes and coaches represented the school throughout Chelsea and beyond.

"We have some really outstanding student-athletes at Chelsea High School," Stallings said. "This year was special, not just because of the wins, but because of how our athletes carried themselves on and off the field. As the athletic director, it's been amazing to see every coach and athlete buy in and do the work to improve, but to also live the values we want to represent every day."

Here are some of the highlights of each team's success from fall to spring:

Volleyball

The Hornets volleyball team had one of its best seasons on record, finishing the 2024 season with 37 wins, 14 losses, a second-place finish in Area 8 play, and a trip to the Alabama High School Athletic Association (AHSAA) semifinals in October — the first in the program's history.

Led by Texas Tech-bound senior Lauren Buchanan, Chelsea reeled off 13 straight wins during the campaign, beginning with a 3-0 win over Helena in early October, and culminating with a 3-0 win over Cullman to launch the Lady Hornets into their first-ever final four.

Chelsea lost to eventual state champs Spanish Fort (3-0 in the semifinals), but the 2024 season remains a magnificent swan song for a group of young ladies who have been together since middle school. This core group of seniors — Buchanan, Payton Walker, Kaleigh Hall, Cara Balcher, Lila Willet, and Presley Durham — has led Chelsea volleyball to new heights and a bright future.

"We were all on the middle school team, and we won our little So-Con championship during our 7th and 8th grade year, so getting to play with them all throughout high school just meant a lot to me," said Buchanan. "We grew really, really close, and it's just like a little family. We were really able to rely on each other during our senior year. When one of us was down, we just picked each other up, and I think that made the season a lot more enjoyable—one last ride with these girls."

Head volleyball coach Jamie Gill said she was so proud of the team for making it to the Final Four which happens to be the best finish in school history.

"These players will always be remembered for their ability to overcome adversity with determination, leadership, and exceptional character," said Gill. "Their relentless work ethic and commitment set a standard that will inspire future teams for years to come."

Girls Basketball

The Chelsea girls' basketball team put together one of the most impressive seasons on record, advancing to the state championship game for the first time in school history,



PHOTO COURTESY OF CHHS VOLLEYBALL FACEBOOK PAGE

culminating at the Birmingham-Jefferson Convention Complex in March. The Lady Hornets went 29-9 in 2024-25 and were a perfect 9-0 in 6A, Region 8 play, including an absolute thrashing of area rival, Spain Park, 41-9, in early February.

The team was led by Haley Trotter, who was a two-time Shelby County Player of Year, 2025 Class 6A All-State First Team and 2024 Class 7A All-State Second Team honoree. The Lady Hornets went on a 16-game win streak beginning in early January which lasted through the state championship game. Even though the Lady Hornets came up just short of their first state title in a hard-fought 10-point loss to Park-Crossing out of Montgomery, the 2024-25 campaign was historic and exciting.

The team will look completely different for the 2025-26 season. Trotter, the winner of many other local and state awards, including the Alabama Sports Writers Association First Team All-State, is moving on to play for Shelton State Community College,

which advanced to the 2024-25 NJCAA DI Women's Basketball National Championship game in April. Former head coach Jason Harlow took the position of girls' head basketball coach at Homewood High School. However, the 2024-25 edition of the Lady Hornets basketball team has set the bar high for future teams.

Girls' Track & Field

The Chelsea High School girls' track-and-field team made history twice in 2024-25. After winning the AHSAA indoor championships for the first time in February, the team followed up with a state title in outdoor track in May.

In an interview shortly after capturing the indoor title, Head Coach Trey Lee told *Chelsea Magazine* that the girls' team had a chance to bring home the hardware as early as last summer, even though the number of athletes on the team is relatively small compared to other dominant programs in the area.

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"I knew back in August this was possible and that this could be done," Lee stated confidently. "Our only downfall is that our team is kind of small. For instance, Mountain Brook had about 20 girls at state, where we had eight that competed and scored points. That was our only downside, but even with that, our girls are determined, hardworking, tenacious — all the good adjectives."

For Lee, who took over as head coach in 2017, building a championship track program is as much about mindset as it is physical skills, and it's his job to figure out how the pieces come together, even if it looks like some pieces are missing.

"I always tell my team I always want to win because I'm so competitive, so I'm always going to train for us to win state. That's always the goal," Lee said. "If we're not in the position to win state, then, as the coach, I think, 'Okay, it's my job to get us in a position to win state. So what can we do?'"

One strategy Lee employed was to borrow athletes from other sports, like sophomore Kamryn Hudson, who helped the 4x200 Indoor Relay Team win first place before suiting up for the Lady Hornets basketball team playoff win over Spain Park. Other standout performances include seniors Hannah Quick and Tamarah Rice in relay and field events, as well as underclassmen Ty Cason and Mia Dunavant, who excelled in multiple events en route to Chelsea's first state indoor championship.

The Lady Hornets went on to win the 6A AHSSA Outdoor Championship on May 3 in Gulf Shores, edging out track bluebloods Mountain Brook and Homewood for the title.

Rice took first place in the triple jump and long jump, while Cason and Dunavant finished first and second in both the Class 6A girls 400- and 800-meter runs, with Cason claiming state titles and Dunavant setting a personal record in the 800. Chelsea capped off the state championships with a first-place finish in the 4x400-meter relay.

Boys' Soccer

Chelsea boys' head soccer coach Lee Miller told *Chelsea Magazine* prior to the start of the 2025 season that this edition of the



PHOTO COURTESY OF LEE MILLER

Hornets could do anything from not make the playoffs at all to winning the whole darn thing. His words couldn't have been more prophetic.

The Hornets advanced to the AHSAA Final 4 in 2025; however, they needed some last-minute magic and more than a little luck just to make the playoffs.

Given all the good soccer teams found in Area 8, the ASHAA may as well rename it the Region of Doom. Many of the state's best teams — Chelsea, Briarwood, Pelham, and Spain Park — are in this region, which means some great teams would be left out of the playoffs in late spring. Miller was convinced the Hornets were in for a rollercoaster ride as soon as the first regular-season area games in early March.

"On the very first night, we knew we were in for it because Pelham and Briarwood went to a shootout, and Briarwood won, and we went to a shootout with Spain Park that we won and I'm like, 'Man, if this is how this area is going to be, we're in for a wild ride.'"

Chelsea white-knuckled their way through the regular season until their second-to-last game on April 10 against Pelham, a team they had already beaten 1-0 back in late March. A win and the Hornets are in the playoffs. A loss to Pelham by more than one goal, and then a Pelham loss to Briarwood a week later by more than three goals, and Chelsea's playoff chances are alive but on life support.

Chelsea jumped out to an early lead over Pelham on a goal by Cooper Baumbaugh. However, Pelham reeled off three unanswered goals to take a 3-1 lead late into the second half. Then the first part of the two-part miracle happened.

After winning the ball back in their defensive half with less than 30 seconds in the game and "elimination right in our face," Baumbaugh's hurried pass to Max Weaver is off the mark, however, Parker Dean tracks the ball down and serves the ball back to Weaver. With a defender on him, Weaver makes a move and slips the ball past the goalkeeper's fingertips into the corner of the goal. The time on the clock: six seconds.



PHOTO BY ELIZABETH GANDY PHOTOGRAPHY

"We lost 3-2, but we celebrated because we were about to be eliminated," Lee says. "We literally saved the season with six seconds left."

Reality set in quickly as they had to wait a week and hope Briarwood could beat Pelham by three goals. Final score: Briarwood 3, Pelham 0. Chelsea was playoff-bound.

The Hornets hit their stride in the playoffs, defeating Helena 4-0, then beating Briarwood — a team Chelsea lost to twice in the regular season — 3-2 in an overtime shootout, and then defeating Calera 3-0 to advance to the final four in Huntsville.

Their run would come to an end with a 2-1 loss to Spanish Fort, despite Chelsea dominating the contest. Chelsea took 16 shots compared to three by Spanish Fort; however, two of those shots were goals on free kicks, the second of which Lee maintains was questionable.

Despite the loss in the semifinals, Chelsea made history, achieving their first back-to-back 20-win season, finishing 2025 with a record of 20-5.

Baseball

The 2025 Chelsea baseball team also had a terrific year, finishing 27-12 and advancing to their first state championship series since 2019. Despite coming up one game short of earning their first-ever state title against Hartselle, Chelsea head baseball coach and athletic director Michael Stallings says the 2025 squad had the chemistry and determi-

nation to succeed all season long.

"They've played like a championship-caliber team the whole year," Stallings says. "It took a lot of pieces to make it happen, and that's what this team has been about this whole year."

Going into the playoffs, Chelsea was on a hot streak, having won seven straight games and 13 of their previous 16 contests. The winning ways continued as the Hornets advanced against Brookwood, Saraland, and Calera, dropping only one game through the first three rounds of the playoffs.

In the semifinals, the Hornets faced Stanhope Elmore, and unlike other sports in which the semifinals are played at a neutral site, the 2-out-3 series was played at Chelsea High School. By the time the first pitch rolled around, the atmosphere was electric. Empty spaces in bleachers were hard to come by, and many students got a bird's-eye view as they watched from the top of the football stadium.

With game one tied 2-2 in the top of the fourth inning, Paxton Stallings was brought in to pitch and managed to get the Hornets out of a tough inning despite the plate umpire calling a tight strike zone. For the rest of the game, Stallings pitched his best, striking out five and trusting his defense to handle a smattering of ground balls and flyouts.

Chelsea snagged the lead in the bottom of the fifth inning, after a long fly ball by Mack Breazeale was muffed by a Stanhope Elmore outfielder, allowing Aiden Hughes to score from second base. Chelsea won game 1, 3-2.

With Chelsea assigned the role of visiting team for game two, Jackson Price pitched a classic. The junior allowed just one run to the Mustangs during a tricky bottom of the fifth, and only two hits for the game.

However, by that point, the Hornets held a commanding lead thanks to a hot top of the fourth inning. A pitchers' duel through the first three innings, a double by Brandon Bousman allowed Chase Lackey to score from second base. Two batters later, Aiden Craven smacked a 2-RBI single to right field. Chelsea led 3-0 after four innings, and led 5-1 at the end of the fifth. The Hornets added three more runs in the top of the seventh inning, pushing the lead to 8-1. Price and the Chelsea defense closed the game out in quick fashion, sending the Hornets to the state championship, and the players, with their hair dyed blonde, rushed the field in euphoric celebration.

"The bats woke up, and we needed them to," Stallings says. "During the course of a game, you never know when the moment is going to be there and the situation is going to present itself, and you have to be willing to capitalize on that moment, and we did."

"It's just the next guy up. That's been the story of this group," Stallings adds. "Everybody's ready when they need to be."

Although the Hornets basketball team fell just short of ending the school year with a state title, losing two games to one against Hartselle, nothing can take away from the success Chelsea athletes accomplished in 2024-25.