

Hornets Soccer Team Reloads For Another Deep Run in 2026

BY LOYD MCINTOSH

The Chelsea Boys soccer team is coming off back-to-back 20-win seasons as well as a historic 2025 campaign that saw the Hornets advance to their first-ever AHSAA Final Four. However, even though the team had the talent, leadership, and desire, the Hornets needed a whole lot of luck to even get to the postseason.

Prior to the 2025 season, Head Coach Lee Miller said the team could either win it all or fail to make the playoffs. Placed in Area 8 – a.k.a. The Group of Death – with other state powerhouses Briarwood, Pelham, and Spain Park, every match felt like a postseason game, with little margin for error and constant scoreboard watching. The Hornets' fate came down to tiebreakers and goal differentials, creating a tense, unpredictable regular season.

That tension peaked in the second-to-last game of the regular season against Pelham, when Chelsea needed to avoid a multi-goal loss to stay alive. Trailing late, the Hornets scored with just six seconds remaining, a goal that didn't change the outcome of the match but saved their season.

A week later, they got help from Briarwood, who beat Pelham by the exact margin required for Chelsea to make the playoffs. From there, Chelsea found its rhythm and surged through the playoffs, but the Hornets' run came to an end with a 2-1 loss to Spanish Fort in the state semifinals, despite dominating throughout the game.

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. While the season didn't end the way it should have for Chelsea, the 2025 campaign was still remarkable, turning a near-miss into one of the most remarkable runs in program history.

"You know, you've got to be a little bit lucky and good, and we had some good bounces go our way until we didn't," said Miller with a chuckle as he reflects on last season. "This game is cruel and brutal. It'll take you to the mountaintop, and then it'll throw you into the valley."

In 2026, Miller is hoping for another successful season without the heart attack-inducing stress. Once again, the Hornets will have to navigate the toughest area in Alabama. However, Miller believes this senior-heavy team has the potential to be playing well into May. He also says trials, tribulations, and achievements have made the guys battle-tested and, more importantly, hungry.

"We're very excited about this group, and I feel really good about this season," Miller said. "This



PHOTOS COURTESY OF LEE MILLER



is actually the group of seniors that we've always pointed to. These are the guys who have a chance to do something really great. Of course, we thought we could do it last year with that group of seniors while these guys were juniors, and, of course, we came close. It's hard to impress this on players, but I think they saw it last year — don't ever give up and keep battling. I feel like they learned it's never over until it's over and fight to the bitter end, and so I think we'll see that all season long with these guys."

Along with the experienced seniors returning, Miller said they have depth at many key positions due to some injuries that forced backups into starting roles last year.

One of the team's key players returning for his senior year is Luke Miller, Coach Miller's son. As the team's co-captain, Miller is entering his fifth year on the varsity squad after starting for the Hornets as an eighth grader. A free-kick specialist, Coach Miller says the offense will go through the capable 12th grader.

"He'll most likely play the attacking-midfielder role, but he's versatile. We can put him anywhere," said Coach Miller, adding that Luke has seen action in almost every position on the field at some point during his high school career. "The only thing we won't use him for is goalkeeper."

Speaking of goalkeepers, Miller says they have two excellent netminders, Andrew Purkey and Madden

Brown, who will compete for the starting job. Both players got field time, subbing in for Brock Marlow in 2025. Both players are well over six feet and were impressive in limited action last season.

"Brown and Purkey will split time, and they know that they're in a battle," he said.

At striker, Miller is bullish on senior co-captain Parker Dean. Another senior who began playing varsity as an eighth-grader, Miller says Dean had a breakout season in 2025 and will be key to the team's success this season.

"He's going to be our main goal-scoring threat up top. He's long and lanky, he can run, has great moves," Miller said. "He's a handful and tough to deal with."

Miller is also excited about Cooper Baumbaugh, a senior forward who got his first significant minutes on varsity last year. Baumbaugh, Miller, and Dean have played together since they were youth players; however, it took a little longer for Baumbaugh to break through due to his smaller size. Baumbaugh went through a growth spurt in the summer of 2024 and was inserted into the starting lineup following some key injuries, taking full advantage of the opportunity.

"Last year, we thought (Baumbaugh) might come in off the bench and be a role player, but we had some injuries early in the season, and he stepped

in and absolutely set the world on fire," Miller said. "We feel like if Parker Dean or Luke or whoever is doing great and other teams try to key on those guys, then Cooper will burn them."

The defense may be the team's least-experienced area, despite several seniors Miller expects to make an impact on the back line. Miller explained that many of the upperclassmen on defense were either role players or played on the junior varsity squad as juniors, but said they will be ready when the season starts in February.

Anchoring the defense will be sophomore Sebastian Palfreeman, who started for the Hornets last year.

"He's super-talented and very athletic," Miller said.

Regardless of who is starting or on the field at any particular moment, Miller said this version of the Chelsea soccer team is experienced, deep, and talented, and he expects the Hornets to wreak havoc in 2026.

"We feel like we're good enough across the board that it's going to be very tough for anybody to key on any particular player because the other guys around are good enough to handle it," he said.

The Chelsea Hornets will open the 2026 soccer season at home against Altamont on Thursday, February 12.