

Montgomery Advertiser

HIGH SCHOOL

Behind the AHSAA expansion of Class 6A football playoffs for 2026

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Feb. 6, 2026, 6:37 p.m. CT

Key Points

- The Alabama High School Athletic Association approved an expanded playoff format for its largest football classification.
 - Beginning in 2026, the new 6A classification will expand its playoff field from 16 to 24 teams.
 - The top six teams from each of the four regions will now earn a playoff bid, instead of the previous top four.
 - This change addresses issues of top-ranked teams missing the playoffs and high travel costs for first-round games.
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The [Alabama High School Athletic Association](#) Central Board of Control approved an expanded playoff format for its largest football classification beginning during the 2026 football season. The motion passed during the CBOC meeting held at the AHSAA office on Friday, Feb. 6.

After the [AHSAA announced its decision to split public and private schools](#) as part of its 2026-27 and 2027-28 reclassification, it eliminated its 7A classification. The 32 of the largest schools by enrollment were placed in 6A where the playoff field has expanded from 16 teams to 24 teams.

In the new playoff format, instead of the top four teams in the four regions in Class 6A making it to the postseason, the top six teams in each region will earn a playoff bid in 2026.

The AHSAA championship committee listened to proposals from its 6A football coaches and took those proposals to present to the CBOC for approval.

AHSAA assistant director J.T. Lawrence presented the proposal on the behalf of the championship committee and told the CBOC that the committee and 6A AHSAA football coaches believe this format will create the most competitive games both in the later rounds and championship game in 6A.

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The process to address changes to the AHSAA 6A football playoffs began in late October of 2025 when Vestavia Hills coach Robert Evans and Alma Bryant coach Bart Sessions started discussing the playoff issues unique to what was Class 7A.

"We tinkered with some brackets and began researching other states," Evans told the Montgomery Advertiser. "We then organized a meeting around the Super 7 to gather input from other 7A coaches around the state."

Two major issues presented themselves to the former 7A classification. The first being that the best teams in 7A weren't getting into the playoffs in 7A.

"When we looked at MaxPrep state power rankings, there were four of the top 25 Teams in Alabama that didn't make the playoffs. They were all in 7A," Evans said.

One of those top 25 teams was Prattville, who was ranked 14th in the state and 10th in Class 7A according to MaxPreps.

Prattville had one of the more interesting final stretches of the season, upsetting teams like Hewitt-Trussville and Hillcrest before falling short against Thompson, knocking the Lions out of the playoffs with a 6-4 record and fifth place finish in region play.

"I believe coaches across our classification were all hoping this expansion would move forward," Prattville coach Bobby Carr said. "We're excited about the opportunities it creates for our student-athletes."

Compared to surrounding states, Evans and Sessions couldn't find any comparisons because surrounding states were getting their best teams in the playoffs every year regardless of classification. Evans and Sessions also found that this was not an issue with other classifications in Alabama.

The second issue former 7A schools were running into was travel costs for first-round matchups in the playoffs.

"The last two years, schools were spending upwards of \$20,000 to play first-round playoff games going from Huntsville to Mobile, or Birmingham to Mobile or Mobile to Huntsville," Evans said. "That needed to be fixed. The

rotating regions for first round games was good in theory, but had too many unintended consequences."

With near unanimous support from now AHSAA 6A football coaches, a model was presented to the CBOC a few weeks ago. Feedback was offered from the CBOC, and the plan was tweaked into the model that passed on Feb. 6.

"It is a blend of the first two models used so far in 7A since 2014. It has limited travel the first two rounds but still uses quadrants," Evans said.

The 6A AHSAA football coaches around the state are grateful for the CBOC and AHSAA executive director Heath Harmon for the feedback they offered, and allowing them to have a voice on the matter.

"I think that it gives the kids an added game and great opportunity for the larger schools to get an extra game," Gadsden City coach Ali Smith said. "It's awesome, something new, something different and it was much needed."

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