SunHerald

HIGH SCHOOL SPORTS

South Mississippi rising power's chase for a state title a family affair in 2026

By Scott Watkins January 7, 2026 5:00 AM

Daniel Grieves needed a moment to breathe in the hallway. His 3A Saint Stanislaus Rock-a-Chaws had just pushed the Gulfport Holiday Classic hosts in the tournament title game, ultimately falling to the 7A Admirals, 56-48.

It was the Rocks' second loss in their first 16 games, and it left their head coach sweat-drenched on the floor of the Bert Jenkins Gym back halls. And of the two Grieves on the SSC staff, Daniel is the calm one.

Saint Stanislaus is forcing itself into a space typically occupied by the Mississippi Coast's usual suspects of Gold Ball chasers. But it didn't happen overnight.

The Rocks began this season with 12 straight wins. Four years ago, in Grieves' first season as head coach, SSC lost its first 12 games. It had won just two games the season before.

Led by seniors Max Baria and Alan Gilliam and junior Rafael "Rafa" Cohen, the Rock-a-Chaws have punched up in wins against Hancock, Gautier, St. Martin, Madison Central and Terry. It's beaten two other talented local private school teams, Resurrection and Christian Collegiate.

Most impressively, it secured its first win over Biloxi since Grieves' senior season as a player in 2011.

"We're not looking at the big picture as far as what our record is," Grieves told the Sun Herald. "We're playing a faceless opponent every night. We feel like if we execute the things that we practice, execute our game plan, then we are putting ourselves in a position to play every night. And it's luckily carried over and parlayed into a pretty fun season so far."

Grieves helped lead SSC to a 4A state championship in 2011 under the guidance of current Southern Miss coach Jay Ladner. It would be the last time the program cracked 20 wins before last year's team reached the mark.

Grieves quickly followed his father into the family business after playing for both ULM and Southeastern Louisiana in college.

Danny Grieves is Daniel's father. He played his college ball at Monmouth. He's one of the most successful coaches in Gulfport's basketball history with 106 wins to only 19 losses and is the only coach who rivals the legendary Bert Jenkins in Holiday Classic victories with five between two teams.

The older Grieves most recently coached in his home state of Illinois at Metamora. He brought his team to Gulfport and won the Holiday Classic during the 21-22 season and won a state title the following year. He coached one more season before retiring.

That retirement lasted one year. The older Grieves is back on the Coast and sharing the bench with his son as an assistant for SSC. The players have immediately felt the impact an extra dose of Grieves basketball brings.

"He's very intense," Baria said. "He's a lot more intense than his son. And he really fires us up at practice. When we do scout team versus starting five, he'll get the scout team hype, and then they start playing really good. He just brings fire to the team."

The younger Grieves, who also now has the help of former USM standout Jason Forte, is more than appreciative for the extra set of experienced hands.

"He's brought a lot of experience, he's won multiple state championships in different states," Grieves said of his father. "He's a consistent factor in practice. I haven't had much help in different aspects of the program. I've had two coaches who have been in the trenches with me my first four years and now we added Jason Forte and my dad. They bring a wealth of knowledge and a different set of eyes to come in and tell me something that I might not see because I've been around the kids so long."

A coach can only do so much, of course, and it's those kids that Grieves credits for pulling the program out of the mire.

Grieves has 13 players on his roster who were in his program from day one. The group pushed over a hump a year ago with 20 wins and a perfect run to a district title.

"Talking to our friends at Saint Stanislaus, our team practices twice as much as every other team and at the beginning they were all winning," Baria said. "Soccer was winning, baseball was winning. We were always at the bottom of the barrel. Now it's turned and everyone can see the work we've put in."

Baria is at the heart of SSC's resurgence. He's a 6-foot-8 senior with a handful of junior college offers. He was in eighth grade when Grieves arrived and merely had an interest in the sport at the time, according to Grieves.

But despite the team's record, Baria bought into himself and the program.

“He gravitated to hard work, and that’s a testament to his parents,” Grieves said. “So giving him a platform to grow and develop in a structured way is something that I think he has liked, personally. Some of the stuff he does is not natural. It is through consistent work on the court when nobody’s in the gym. No fans in the gym. It’s just him working.”

Baria has consistently risen to the occasion for the Rocks. He had 14 points, 9 rebounds and 6 blocks in the Biloxi game that resulted in the Indians scoring a season-low 36 points.

He’s flanked by the point guard Cohen, an international transfer who has complemented Baria with his ability as a slashing creator and effective facilitator.

Cohen can score when needed, as evidenced by his 21-point outing against Gulfport, but has the vision to spread the floor.

Gilliam is the ultimate benefactor of the gravity formed by Cohen and Baria. The senior and reigning district MVP has a deadly three-ball that makes for a tough cover when Baria and Cohen draw defenders into the paint.

“It’s really tough when you have guys who can hit shots, get to the rim and score inside,” Grieves said. “So it’s been awesome. It’s been great for their confidence and it’s been a lot of fun watching them enjoy the game of basketball.”

The Rock-a-Chaws have emerged as a strong favorite to make the trip up Highway 49 to Jackson as the south state representative in the Final Four.

There’s plenty of basketball between now and then, but SSC believes its tough non-region schedule is preparing it for postseason play.

And there’s the confidence, too.

“State championship, 100%,” Baria said of what the Rocks are capable of. “We just got to learn from our mistakes and learn from our losses.”