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MGOLF Season Preview: Deep and Talented, GS Has Sights on Sun Belt Title

Eagles open the season at Invitational at The Ocean Course Sunday.

Marc Gignac

Men's Golf

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STATESBORO – If the 2018-19 Georgia Southern men's golf team were a stock, the street would label it a growth opportunity.

There are a few unknowns, but the fundamentals are good and the CEO has a proven track record. The pieces are there for a steady climb. There may be some bumps here and there, but overall, the Eagles are a Strong Buy as the season begins this weekend at the Invitational at The Ocean Course.

GS returns seven lettermen from last year's squad, including Sun Belt Player of the Year Steven Fisk, and welcome four newcomers who are all expected to play in the lineup this season.

With lineup mainstays Archer Price and Jake Story, who combined to play in 80 tournaments, lost to graduation, it may appear as if the Eagles have some large FootJoys to fill. Coach Carter Collins chooses to look at the scenario differently.

"We're not in the business of trying to fill those shoes, we're trying to bring in student-athletes who are prepared to compete and keep this program heading in the right direction," he said. "The freshmen and the new guys have shown they have that. We have a lot of new faces in the first event, and it's a great opportunity for them to hit the ground running and start building their own career."

Fisk, who led the Sun Belt and set a new school record with a 69.78 scoring average last year, returns for his senior campaign looking to have an even better season. That will be a tough task considering he shot 72 or better in 26 of 33 rounds and finished in the top-10 in seven of 10 events, including three top-5s and two wins.

"I think Steven has always had the mentality that each day, you start back at zero - there's no extra credit for what you have done in the past - and that's why he has been able to be so successful," said Collins. "He has an elite mindset and an elite golf game, and that's why he's pretty special. There were few moments last year where he didn't have any perspective on what he was doing - he was just doing it - so I expect him to have that same attitude this year - keep marching forward."

Crawford Simmons has been named a team captain along with Fisk and will be in the lineup this weekend. The senior cracked the lineup last spring and posted a 76.21 scoring average in 14 rounds. A former Major League Baseball pitching prospect who was drafted out of high school, his game has gotten better and better over his three years in the program.

"What Crawford has been able to do from when he started as a freshman to where he is now has been incredible, and it's been through a lot of pure hard work and determination," said Collins. "He fights for every inch on the golf course, and he's a great example of someone who wants the responsibility of everything that comes with being a leader, which he's handled extremely well."

Sophomore Avery Price had a phenomenal summer and recently tied the course record (64, -8) at The Ford Plantation while qualifying to earn his spot on the bus this week. Freshman Wilson Andrews and Ben Carr played very well during qualifying to earn a spot in the lineup along with Fisk and Simmons. Junior Jake Maples and freshman Mason Williams will play as individuals.
Price notched a 75.90 scoring average in 11 rounds and four tournaments last season, while Carr and Andress were the top two-ranked juniors in the state of Georgia over the last two years.

Maples, a junior college transfer, was a semifinalist for the Jack Nicklaus Player of the Year Award in the NJCAA and achieved a Golfstat ranking as high as No. 8. Williams, the No. 1 ranked junior in the state of West Virginia, played in the U.S. Amateur at Pebble Beach in August after earning a spot in the field through qualifying out of 7,500 entrants for the prestigious tournament.

The four Eagles not competing this weekend all figure to have an impact in the lineup this year.

Brett Barron struggled in the spring, but the junior won the prestigious Georgia State Amateur in July after carding 68-69-66-68 (-9) at Athens Country Club. Junior Luukas Alakulppi spent a lot of time in the lineup last season, competing in nine tournaments, including the Sun Belt Championship, and posting a 74.50 scoring average.

Sophomore Jacob Bayer came on at the end of the season and made the lineup for the Sun Belt Championship, finishing the season with a 75.65 scoring average in seven tournaments. Junior Alexander DeRosa recorded a 77.50 scoring average in eight rounds and three tournaments.

The Eagles, who advanced to the Sun Belt Championship match each of the last two seasons, have their sights set on finishing the deal this year. The Eagles have the talent and depth to get there and are focused on getting better each time on the course.

"The word the team chose to define itself this year is grit, and the main thing is that we're fighting for is progress each week," said Collins. "We're looking to use our grit and determination to build and grow each and every week to reach our goals."

Notes on The Ocean Course
The Ocean Course at Kiawah Island Golf Resort has played host to the 2007 Senior PGA and 2012 PGA Championships. It will also host the 2021 PGA Championship. The Ocean Course is only the fourth course to host each of the PGA of America's major championships. Located on the eastern-most end of Kiawah Island, The Ocean Course has more seaside holes than any other course in the Northern Hemisphere. Middle Tennessee State shot a three-round 850 (-14) to claim the 2016 tournament title, while Ole Miss was runner-up (-8), Maryland third (-5) and Georgia Southern fourth (-4). Last year's tournament was cancelled due to Hurricane Irma.

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