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PREVIEW: GS Women's Basketball Faces Louisiana In SBC Tournament Opener Tuesday

Eagles looking to spring the upset and pick up first tourney win in New Orleans

Women's Basketball

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NEW ORLEANS, La. - The Georgia Southern women's basketball team opens up 2017-18 Sun Belt Conference Tournament play on Tuesday as the No. 11 seed, facing sixth-seeded Louisiana at 8:30 p.m. CT at Lakefront Arena in New Orleans, La.

This is the second straight Sun Belt Conference tournament appearance for the Eagles (5-24, 2-16 SBC), who last year also played in the 6-11 first-round game, but as the sixth seed, falling to 11th-seeded Arkansas State, 61-50. This year, the Eagles face the Ragin' Cajuns (15-15, 10-8 SBC), who finished in a three-way tie for sixth place in the league standings. Louisiana went 3-0 against Coastal Carolina and Arkansas State this season to win the tiebreaker and earn the No. 6 seed.

The two teams met in Statesboro on Feb. 10 in their regular season meeting, with Louisiana winning 58-48. The Eagles shot just 25 percent in the contest and made only 5-of-27 three-pointers (18.5 percent). Senior [Alexis Foulks](#) grabbed 15 rebounds for Georgia Southern, the most rebounds for an Eagle women's basketball player in a single game since Danielle Spencer had 17 rebounds at Jacksonville on Nov. 24, 2013. Sophomore [Hailey Dias-Allen](#) led the Eagles offensively with 10 points.

Louisiana placed three players in double figures, led by 15 points from Jasmine Thomas, 14 points from Troi Swain and 12 points off the bench from Simone Fields. The Ragin' Cajuns shot just 36.5 percent from the floor (19-of-52) and hit only 6-of-24 from three-point range (25 percent). Louisiana leads the overall series between the two teams, 6-1.

Georgia Southern enters the tournament on a six-game losing streak, but there are other reasons why the Eagles are feeling optimistic they might be able to spring the upset in the 1st round of the tournament on Tuesday. Counting the Eagles' last win, a 75-45 victory over UL Monroe on Feb. 8 - the largest margin of victory for the Eagles in a Sun Belt contest -

Georgia Southern is averaging 62.1 ppg, compared to just 54 ppg in the previous 22 games. GS is also shooting 34.8 percent over its last seven, compared to 32.1 percent previously.

"As the year has gone on, we've seen the level of play get better, we have just not consistently shot the ball at a high level," Georgia Southern Head Coach [Kip Drown](#) said heading into the tournament. "That's the area right now that's starting to come for us. We're starting to make shots. All along, we felt if we just made shots, we were right there with people. It's been a real gradual process going through it, but making shots has been kind of the final straw for us, and that's starting to get better."

One of the keys to the recent play has been the emergence of sophomore point guard [Amira Atwater](#). Atwater currently ranks third in the Sun Belt in assists per game overall (4.1 apg) and fourth in Sun Belt-only games (4.6 apg). She has 114 assists this season, becoming the first Georgia Southern women's basketball player to reach 100 assists in a season since Carolyn Whitney had 104 in the 2006-07 campaign.

"We struggled in the non-conference games, and didn't play very well," Coach Drown said. "But as we hit into conference, we could see things improving. The first place we saw it was in our tempo offensively. We saw that coming, saw [Amira Atwater](#) start to exert herself as the point guard, pushing tempo. And as she starting doing that, our looks started getting better. They didn't go in just yet, but they started getting better. Her assist/turnover ratio from the beginning to the season coming through has really gone off the charts. I think her stepping into that point guard role, pushing and setting tempo, was the start of us beginning to play better and starting to find our identity as a basketball team."

The improvement can be seen in the very first and last games of the Sun Belt campaign for the Eagles. Back on December 29, Georgia Southern played at Troy in its first league game of the year and were never in the contest, losing 88-49 and shooting a season-low 22.9 percent from the field. On Saturday against the third-place Trojans, the Eagles were much more competitive, shooting 41.9 percent from the floor and staying within five points until late in the fourth quarter of a 95-80 loss to Troy.

The Eagles will play the final game of Tuesday's first round of the 2017-18 Sun Belt Conference Tournament. The game [will be broadcast on ESPN3](#), while [Colin Lacy will have the audio webcast on the Georgia Southern Sports Network](#). [Live stats are also available](#).

The winner of Tuesday's contest will advance to the quarterfinals to face No. 3 seeded UT Arlington on Thursday, March 8, at 8:30 p.m. ET.

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