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SEASON PREVIEW: Next Step For GS Men's Soccer Is Right Around The Corner
After its first winning season since 2006 and first regional ranking since 2008, Eagles eager to prove they belong
Men's Soccer

STATESBORO, Ga. - Following up on a successful first season in Statesboro, Georgia Southern Head Coach [John Murphy](#) continued the upward trend of Eagle Soccer in 2017, by directing the squad to its first winning record since the 2006 season and the first regional ranking from the United Soccer Coaches since 2008. With all of that in place, the upward trend of the program seems ripe for a regional and national breakthrough in 2018 as Georgia Southern continues to strive to be one of the top NCAA soccer programs in the country. But, more importantly, Coach Murphy is excited about the culture and tradition that the Eagles have built in such a short amount of time since coming to campus just a couple of years ago.

TAKING THAT NEXT STEP

The Eagles finished with a 9-8-1 overall record in 2017, claiming a third-place finish in the Sun Belt Conference and picking up some key wins during the campaign, including a thrilling 2-1 win over Sun Belt champion Coastal Carolina. A challenging schedule featured many matches against NCAA participants and the Eagles also developed a penchant for winning on the road, something extremely difficult to do in any collegiate sport, as Georgia Southern was 4-2 in road contests last season.

In 2018, the Eagles return 13 players from last season's squad and add a strong corps of 17 newcomers who hail from around the Southeast as well as around the globe. Getting those newcomers to mix with the experienced returners and continue the upward trend of Eagle soccer is a challenge, but one that Coach Murphy and his staff welcomes.

"We have a great deal of talent here on campus," Coach Murphy said. "We've done a nice job of recruiting these past two years, but I feel sometimes the best kind of recruitment is developing the players that you have, and that's the challenge for the staff and I. 'Can we get the best out the group that's here?' If we can do that, if we can get the best out of the group that we have, then I think it can be a successful season for us."

The Eagles have been picked to finish third in the upcoming 2018 season in a preseason poll of Sun Belt Conference coaches, and improving on the winning record from a season ago will be a tough task with a schedule that features six matches against teams that played in the NCAA Championships in 2017 - including five teams who finished the year in the NCAA Division I Top 30 of RPI. And Coach Murphy knows that his program is in a spot where they are not going to be overlooked by anyone.

"The days of sneaking up on teams are done," Coach Murphy said. "People have a lot of respect for our program. We've got to go into those games ready to play, because we'll get their best from them. I like to think we're on the right path. The exciting thing is that the season is all laid out in front of us."

POSITION BY POSITION

Coach Murphy knows with a deep roster, competition comes with each position and the expectation is that the cream will rise to the top as preseason and early season battles play out.

One of the positions that will see a tremendous amount of competition early will be the forwards. Losing two-time All-Conference selection [Blake Wilson](#) means opportunities are ripe for someone to step up, and one player who looks set to do just that is senior [Javier Carbonell](#), who was the Sun Belt's Newcomer of the Year in 2017. Carbonell tallied four goals and a Sun Belt-leading nine assists last year and has the look of someone who could be in the upper echelon of Sun Belt strikers in 2018. Sophomore [Jack Rittmeyer](#) and redshirt freshman [Edward Raji](#) also return up top for the Eagles, and the group will be bolstered by a pair of newcomers from overseas; Darby County FC product [Adam Davie](#) from England and Strommen IF product [Marius Bjernes](#) from Norway.

Midfield is the deepest position group, in terms of numbers as well as returners. A pair of starters from last season return - junior [Sander Wang](#), who returned from injury late in the season to play an important role in the Eagles' trip to the Sun Belt semifinals, as well as sophomore [Alhaji Tambadu](#). Senior [Sebastian Gregersen](#) along with redshirt freshmen [Kareem Gharbi](#) and [Cody Prentiss](#) also return from last season. The Eagles expect to get a boost from a bevy of newcomers, including Norwegian first division product Eirik Hoydal (Floro) and VfB Stuttgart product from Germany, [Samuel Mayer](#). Sophomore Mercer transfer [Cristian Medina](#) also joins the Eagles after spending his freshman season in Macon.

The most experienced returning group are the defenders, as the trio of junior [Justin Little](#), sophomore [Aldair Cortes](#) and sophomore [Gonzalo Talavera](#) started all 18 matches last season and collectively played 4,764 minutes of a possible 4,950 on the year - or 96% of minutes available. Cortes was the Sun Belt's Newcomer of the Year, while Little and Talavera earned All-Tournament honors at the Aaron Olitsky Tournament in Charleston to open the season. Redshirt junior [David Rhoades](#) also returns for the squad, and redshirt freshman [Cody Prentiss](#) could also see time on the back line. Chief among the newcomers for Georgia Southern on the back line include Truett-McConnell transfer and German native [Paul Schulze](#); freshman [Lee Flowers](#) (Marietta, Ga.), who is the son of NFL safety Lethon Flowers, and Columbia, S.C., native [Parker Stokes](#).

Two returners and two newcomers make up the goalkeeping group for the Eagles in 2018. [Torgeir Fjaer](#), who has eight career wins and a 1.42 GAA in 20 career matches, returns for his senior season, while redshirt sophomore [Conner Washer](#) also returns. Freshman [Jokull Blaengsson](#), who saw action for the Icelandic U-21 National Team this Summer, is expected to compete right away, while freshman [Eric Nunez](#) (McDonough, Ga.) also joins the team.

THE SCHEDULE

The Eagles hit the ground running with a season-opening trip to a pair of NCAA teams, VCU (Aug. 24) and Old Dominion (Aug. 26), this weekend. Georgia Southern opens its home slate of seven matches by hosting North Florida on August 31st. The month of September features home matches against Florida Gulf Coast (Sept. 7), ETSU (Sept. 22) and Winthrop (Sept. 26), while mixing in tough road matches at preseason No. 5-ranked Wake Forest (Sept. 11), Jacksonville (Sept. 15) and NCAA participant Mercer (Sept. 29).

A home match against Florida Atlantic (Oct. 2) opens up the month of October, then a big three-match road swing follows with the Sun Belt opener at Howard (Oct. 6), a visit to preseason No. 6-ranked Louisville (Oct. 9) and a trip to C-USA foe UAB (Oct. 16). The Eagles then return home for a big rivalry series showdown with Georgia State (Oct. 20) and Appalachian State (Oct. 27) to close out the home slate. The regular season finale will be on Nov. 2 at preseason Sun Belt favorite Coastal Carolina.

One exciting part of the season for the Eagles in 2018 is that Statesboro will host the 2018 Sun Belt Conference Championships, the second time the school has hosted the tournament since joining the league in 2014. The first-round match will be on Nov. 7, with the semifinals taking place on Nov. 9 and the championship match scheduled for Sunday, Nov. 11. All SBC Tournament matches will be featured on ESPN+.

"We're going against a much more difficult schedule that's been played since I've been here," Coach Murphy said. "We've done that on purpose. We feel like, for us to take the next step regionally, you have to play nationally-respected programs. I have good relationships with coaches throughout the country. I respect and appreciate coaches that want to play us. They recognize that we are a team that likes to play, we are a challenging team to compete against. I hope they see it the way we see it - that it will bring out the best in both teams."

CREATING THE CULTURE

Culture is a buzzword among athletic teams, but Coach Murphy believes that he has had great success developing a winning culture around Georgia Southern men's soccer in a relatively short amount of time.

"I think we're a lot closer than we were at this time last year," Coach Murphy said. "It's hard to get the balance right. Whenever you come in and want to address standards and get people going, you're challenging and getting them out of their comfort zone. There can be some fear involved with that. Sports psychologists call it a 'storming phase'. It's part of the process. We probably stayed in the 'storming phase' longer than we should have last year, but I won't apologize for having high standards."

"If we look back, we've accomplished an awful lot in two years. We really have. It's easy to look and maybe be critical, say that we could have won more games here and there. But I think it's measured by what our culture is daily. The culture is very strong at Georgia Southern, and that helps us when we step on the field. The players we're putting out on the field are battle-ready, they know the challenges that lie ahead, and I feel that they're ready for them because of the culture we've established for them."

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