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Georgia Southern University

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Eagles Look to Continue Upward Ascension in 2017

GS returns 16 players from last year's squad

Overview
The Georgia Southern softball team wrapped up the 2016 season with a return trip to the Sun Belt Conference Tournament and saw a +18 game improvement from the previous year, ranking as one of the best marks in the country.

The 2016 Eagles finished the year with a 30-27 record, including 13-11 in conference play, and made plenty of strides on the softball field to have head coach Annie Smith optimistic about 2017 and beyond.
Expectations are high in Statesboro this year as Smith welcomes back almost her entire team back and has added a strong group of newcomers to the fold.

Let's take a look at each group of position players, the staff and the 2017 GS schedule.

**Pitchers**

While offense and defense are key, in college softball, it starts in the circle and Georgia Southern has quite the staff to work with this season. Led by 2016 Sun Pitcher Freshman of the Year Dixie Raley, the Eagles will rely heavily on the arms of their staff this year as they look to make a run to the postseason.

Raley, a sophomore from Milledgeville, Georgia, was named to the 2017 Preseason All-Conference team after a strong freshman campaign. Raley finished her true freshman campaign with a 22-14 record, two saves and five shutouts in 43 appearances with 34 games started, complimenting a team-leading 3.33 ERA. She pitched 202 total innings, the ninth-most by an Eagle pitcher in a single campaign, and struck out 182 batters, tied for fifth-most in a single season.

It's not a one-arm show in Statesboro as new pitching coach Kaitlyn Medlam has several strong players to work with, including juniors Kierra Camp and Heather Felt. Camp, from Conyers, Georgia, made 26 appearances in the circle for the Eagles, picking up six wins last year. She started 20 games and recorded 44 strikeouts in 117 1/3 innings. Felt, from Lawrenceville, Georgia, made 19 appearances in the circle and tossed 39 2/3 innings of work. She earned wins over Appalachian State and Georgia State in conference play.

Also looking for action in the circle will be senior Amanda Chambers and sophomore Kaylee Ramos. Chambers, from Lilburn, Georgia, made six appearances in her first season with the Eagles last season, tossing 6 2/3 innings while Ramos, from Sugar Hill, Georgia, made four appearances in the circle, pitching 3 2/3 innings.

"Dixie did a great job for us last year and earned Sun Belt Freshman of the Year honors, but we have a nice mix of pitching styles with five different arms, so it's hard to prepare for us," Smith said. "Kierra and Heather have done some great things this offseason and give us a great combination when we bring them in, but it's nice to have Amanda and Kaylee available as well, both in game situations and in practice. Overall, we have a lot of depth with our pitching staff, which will be a big help with the tough schedule."

**Catchers**

Long-time fans of the Eagles will have to get used to a new backstop this season as gone is A.J. Hamilton, who started all 227 games over the past four seasons. While Smith know it will be a new face behind the dish, the question is who?

Senior Andrea McKenzie saw limited action last year, appearing in just 10 games, mostly at the plate. The senior from Lynn Haven, Florida, has a leg up on collegiate
experience as she played two years at Wallace State CC-Hanceville, but will be in a battle with a pair of freshmen for the starting job this season.

**Abby Broome** is a fresh face looking to crack the lineup this year. She hails from Acworth, Georgia, and was a three-time all-region selection who was named first-team all-state as a junior.

"We obviously have to replace someone who has been behind the plate the past four years, but I'm confident that whoever we put back there will do a good job," Smith said. "We need a catcher out there who is going to play solid defense, handle the pitchers and manage the infield. I'm excited to see what we have back there."

**Outfield**

It will be a lot of the same names, but in different positions this spring for the GS outfield. **Emily Snider, Lydia Witkowski, Michelle Mazur, Haley Carter** and **Macy Weeks** saw at least some starting action last season. Snider saw most of her action in right and center field, while Witkowski and Weeks both saw start time in left field and Carter got 10 starts in the outfield. Expect some shuffling of positions and personnel until Smith finds the right combination.

Snider, one of five seniors on the roster, earned All-Sun Belt Conference Second-Team honors last year, starting all 57 games in the outfield for the Eagles. The Tennille, Georgia, native batted .302 for the year, but that average went up to .375 in conference action. She finished the year with 52 hits (second on the team), 29 runs scored, 34 RBIs (second on the team) and 20 extra base knocks, including 11 doubles, two triples and seven home runs.

Witkowski, a redshirt sophomore from Alpharetta, Georgia, started 55 games last year. She led the team with a .324 batting average with 39 runs scored, 59 hits, five triples and a .391 on-base percentage.

Weeks, from Dalton, Georgia, started 23 of the 37 games she saw action in, splitting time between the outfield and designated player position. She hit three home runs on the year and reached base safely in 16 games.

Mazur is a utility player who can play anywhere. The senior from Palatine, Illinois, played in 26 games last year, earning 10 starts split between the designated player, right field and second base positions. She batted .225 with a pair of home runs and five RBIs for the year, but that average went up to .286 in Sun Belt Conference action where she had six hits including a homer.

Smith will have several young options to also plug into spots, should she go that route. At 4-10, Carter is a diminutive, but speedy, redshirt sophomore who saw action in the outfield and as the designated player last year. The Smyrna, Tennessee, native played in 42 games and made 17 starts - including the final 12 games - and batted .270 for the year. **Mekhia Freeman** is a freshman speedster from Senoia, Georgia, who was named
the All-Region 2-AAAAAAAA Player of the Year as a senior.

Several others on the rosters are considered utility players who could also move to the grass if needed.

**Infield**

A lot of familiar faces return in the infield as all four regular starters are back: senior **Morgan Robinson** at first base, junior **India Davis** at second base, junior **Alesha Mann** at shortstop and sophomore **Hannah Farrell** at third base.

Robinson started all 57 games at first base last year for the Eagles, batting .282 for the year. The Stone Mountain, Georgia, native finished the season with 46 hits, including 17 extra base knocks, 22 runs scored and a team-best 48 RBIs, which were the third-most runs batted in by an Eagle player in school history.

Davis, who hails from Conyers, Georgia, played in 55 of the Eagles' 57 games, starting 52 in the middle infield. For the season, she batted .313, which was second on the team, but her batting average went up to .366 against teams ranked inside the top-75 of the RPI.

Mann, a senior from Lawrenceville, Georgia, started all 57 games in the middle infield, mostly at the shortstop position. She ended the year batting .285 overall, but that went up to .294 against ranked opponents and .303 in conference games. Mann recorded eight home runs and 28 RBIs on the season. She also had three game-winning hits, all of which were home runs, including a walk-off against Boise State.

Farrell came in and started all 57 games at third base last season as a true freshman and led the team with 91 assists from the hot corner. The Jesup, Georgia, native batted .251 on the year with 42 hits, 17 runs scored and 21 RBIs.

Nothing is set in stone as several other players will battle for playing time.

**Shelby Wilson** is a freshman who could also figure into things. The Clyo, Georgia, native was a highly decorated prep player who earned Class AAAAA all-state honors three times. She was also named the Region 3-AAAAA Player of the Year in 2015 after being Co-Player of the Year in 2014. For her career, she batted .400 with an .842 slugging percentage as she hit 24 home runs and had 85 RBIs.

**Meredith McLendon**, a freshman from Valdosta, Georgia, was an all-region honoree three times. As a senior in 2015, she was named all-region and all-state while hitting .517 with two home runs and 20 RBI.

**Madison Cavender**, from Gray, Georgia, is a versatile player who could also see action in the infield or behind the plate. She was a four-time all-region selection and was a second-team all-state selection as a senior.
Staff
With the departure of Chelsea Leonard and Marie Fogle, Smith had to do some recruiting away from the field in picking up two new assistant coaches. The program welcomed a pair of former collegiate standouts to the program in the fall in Kaitlyn Medlam and Megan Hill.

Medlam, who was a standout at Georgia State who pitched in The Netherlands professionally last year, will handle the pitchers while Hill, who earned honors at Southern Miss, will help work with the hitters and will coach the outfielders, while also coaching first base when GS is batting.

"Kaitlyn has pitched in this league, so that's nice," Smith said. "She's from Georgia and has a good understanding of recruiting this region. She's worked really well with our pitchers and I'm excited to see what she does with them moving forward.

"I recruited Megan when I was at Mississippi State, but she ended up going to Southern Miss, so I've known her for a long time. We have a lot of similar philosophies from our coaching connections and I think she's going to be really good for us."

Smith, who enters her sixth season at the helm of the program, earned her 150th career win during the 2016 campaign and is now the only coach in Georgia Southern history to record four 30-win seasons.

Schedule
The slate of 52 games features 27 home contests, including the hosting of two tournaments, and features marquee games against five Southeastern Conference foes. The Eagles were picked fifth in the preseason league coaches poll.

"It is always exciting for the challenge that a new season presents," Smith said. "We have a tough non-conference schedule that will prepare us for the battle in the Sun Belt. The two home tournaments will offer our fans, who support us so well, more opportunities to see the Eagles in action. We are excited to get the year going and to open the season at home next week."

Georgia Southern plays 19 teams that finished the 2016 campaign with at least 30 wins, including six teams that collected 40 wins and two that ended the year with at least 50 wins. Also included in the 2017 schedule are eight teams that participated in the NCAA Tournament and three Women's College World Series (WCWS) participants.

"I always have really high expectations because I feel like you're doing your team a disservice if you don't," Smith said. "If we do what we need to do, and keep improving, the sky is the limit. Our league is tough and it showed on Selection Sunday last year. We were picked fifth this year and that shows a lot of respect from how far we've come in two years. The great thing about the league is that there is no break, which makes it a challenge. There are no days off. If you don't show up, you're going to lose, which makes this a great league to be in and I'm excited to get things kicked off next weekend.
here in Statesboro."

The Eagles will commence the season at home with the Eagle Round Robin Tournament, featuring UNCG, Middle Tennessee, Tennessee and Tennessee Tech. GS will play UNCG and MT on Feb. 10, UT and TTU on Feb. 11 and close out the tourney against the Blue Raiders of MT on Feb. 12. The Volunteers of UT finished the 2016 campaign with a 43-16 record and advanced to an NCAA Regional.

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In order to expedite entry and provide a safe environment for all patrons and participants, Georgia Southern Athletics has implemented a Clear Bag Policy for all ticketed sporting events, effective Aug. 1, 2017. Fans can find the complete policy as well as an FAQ section at GSEagles.com/ClearBag.