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Georgia Southern University

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Eagles Set To Open 2017 Season At Home

Eagle Round Robin kicks off Friday in Statesboro

ON THE DIAMOND
The Georgia Southern softball team opens the 2017 season at home, hosting the Eagle Round Robin. The Eagles open the season on Friday at 4 p.m., against UNCG and follow that game up with a contest against Middle Tennessee at 6 p.m. On Saturday, the Eagles play No. 15 Tennessee at 3:30 p.m., and then take on Tennessee Tech at 5:30 p.m. GS wraps up the weekend with a game against Middle Tennessee at 2 p.m., on Sunday. In all, there will be 12 games played over the three-day span.
FACILITY AND TICKET INFO
All games will be played at Eagle Field on the campus of Georgia Southern. The address is 615 Fair Rd, Statesboro, GA 30458. Admission is free.

Here's the tournament site, which has the schedule and live stat links.

PROMOTIONS
• Valentine's Day Concessions Promo: Nicknames will be given to select concessions items ("You're my shooting Starburst"). If a fan orders the item with the nickname, they will receive a discount.

• Colonial House of Flowers Promo: Allow Colonial House of Flowers to set up a spot on-site to sell small flowers and provide giveaways to fans.

• Couple of the Game: On Saturday, a couple will be chosen as the "Couple of the Game" to receive a rose from Colonial House of Flowers

• Sunday Funday: During every Sunday game, fans are encouraged to bring their dogs behind the outfield to watch the game (Bark in the Park). We will also let a kid make an announcement during the game (Little Eagle Announcer). After every game, kids will be able to run the bases and enjoy post-game autographs/meet and greets at select games.

For the entire year's promotions, go to: http://gseagles.com/sports/2016/2/18/BSB_0218160736.aspx

THE WEEKEND FORECAST
Here's the forecast for Statesboro. Be sure to follow Georgia Southern softball on Twitter (@GSAthletics_SB) for any potential schedule changes this weekend due to the weather or other factors.

YEAR NO. 6
Georgia Southern head coach Annie Smith begins her sixth season at the helm of the Eagles. Her tenure in Statesboro has taken the Eagles to new heights with two SoCon Regular Season Championships and two SoCon Tournament Championships as well as overseeing the transition to the Sun Belt Conference in Smith's four previous seasons. During her tenure, Smith has advanced to the NCAA Tournament twice (2012 and 2013) as the Eagles have quickly made a name for themselves within the regional and national landscape.

Smith enters the 2017 campaign with an overall career record of 152-137. In 2014, she became the fastest coach in Georgia Southern history to reach 100 career wins when her team posted a 4-0 victory over Appalachian State on April 5.

Smith joined Georgia Southern with 16 years of experience as a collegiate assistant coach, serving at Missouri for six seasons before heading to Mississippi State for nine years, handling all aspects of the program. In 2006, Smith was promoted to associate head coach of the Bulldogs.
WHO'S BACK?
The Eagles return 16 players from last year's squad, including six of eight starters in the field, their DP and five pitchers who saw action. Offensively, five of Georgia Southern's top six regular hitters in terms of batting average from a year ago return: Lydia Witkowski (.324, 5 3B), India Davis (.313, 8 SB), Emily Snider (.297, 7 HR), Alesha Mann (.285, 8 HR, 10 SB) and Morgan Robinson (.282, 8 HR, 48 RBIs).

In the circle, GS returns the reigning Sun Belt Freshman of the Year in Dixie Raley, who won 22 games and struck out 182 batters in 202.0 innings pitched. Kiera Camp and Heather Felt also saw significant action in the circle and return in 2017.

THE NEWBIES
Georgia Southern welcomes five newcomers to the program this year. Here's a look at each of them and where they might fit in:
- Abby Broome, a freshman catcher from Acworth, Georgia
- Madison Cavendar, a freshman infielder/catcher from Gray, Georgia
- Mekhia Freeman, a freshman outfielder/utility player from Senoia, Georgia
- Meredith McLendon, a freshman infielder from Valdosta, Georgia
- Shelby Wilson, a freshman infielder from Clyo, Georgia

SEASON OPENERS
Since 1990, the Eagles are 12-14 in season openers and will look to build on that mark when they take on UNCG. Georgia Southern had won its past five season openers before falling last year to Mississippi State to open the 2016 campaign. GS is 4-1 in season openers under head coach Annie Smith.

SCOUTING MIDDLE TENNESSEE
Middle Tennessee finished its 2016 season with an overall record of 23-31, and a conference record of 6-18. The team will return four starters who played in at least 50 of the Raiders' 54 games last season. One of these starters includes Precious Birdsong who hit .347 last season in 54 games, and recorded 61 hits, 38 steals and a .442 on-base percentage. Another returnee is sophomore Kirstyn Cuccia, who played and started in 25 games last season and hit a team-high .372 in 78 at bats. She also earned a .513 slugging percentage and a .420 on base percentage. Cuccia lead the team in almost every category until an injury cut her season short in March.

This season, Middle Tennessee welcomes Cori Jennings, a transfer from Chattanooga. Last season, Jennings managed 16 wins with a 3.51 ERA and 122 strikeouts in 32 appearances. Megan Chocallo and Pattie Ruth Taylor are also returning to the pitching staff this year. The Raiders are predicted to finish 11th in their conference this season.

The Eagles and Middle Tennessee have met 14 previous times with GS leading 9-5. The two haven't met since 2014.
SCOUTING TENNESSEE
The University of Tennessee finished last season with an overall record of 43-16 and a conference record of 16-7. The Volunteers finished third in the league after being picked to finish fifth in the preseason coaches' poll. UT returns four players who earned SEC postseason honors last year and also will bring back seven of its top 10 hitters from 2016.

Last season, senior outfielder Megan Geer set career highs in batting average (.368), runs (61), hits (60), RBIs (55), walks (39), stolen bases (25), on-base percentage (.493) and slugging percentage (.638). Junior Meghan Gregg finished last season with a team-leading batting average of .383 and started in all of the Vol's 59 games. Another standout player is sophomore Brook Vines, who had an impressive freshman season, posting a .360 batting average and leading the team with 19 multi-hit games. This year UT is ranked at No. 15 in both the USA Today/NFCA Division I Preseason Coaches' Poll and the ESPN.com/USA Softball Collegiate Preseason Top 25.

The Eagles are 0-10 all-time against Tennessee, but last last two times the teams met, it was close as GS fell 1-0 in Statesboro and 2-0 in Knoxville, both games coming in 2014.

UT's 2016 stats
UT's 2017 roster

SCOUTING TENNESSEE TECH
Last season, Tennessee Tech went 23-33 overall, and 14-13 in its conference match ups. This season, the team has a mix of old and new as the Golden Eagles bring back 13 letterwinning players, and welcome five newcomers to the team. Senior returnee Gabby Perez appeared in 49 games last season and started in 47 for Tech at second base. She was the second-leading hitter for the Golden Eagles with a .279 batting average and tallied 16 runs and three RBIs. Perez ended the season with a .955 fielding percentage, committing just nine errors on the year with 108 putouts and 84 assists.

Another familiar face for Tennessee Tech is Junior Bayli Cruse. She appeared in 53 games last season making 52 starts primarily at first base. Cruse was Tech's third leading hitter with a .258 batting average, tallying 12 doubles, two home runs, and 19 RBIs on the year. Sophomore Leigh Thomas had a strong debut season appearing in 41 games and making 29 starts for Tech, primarily from the circle or first base. She hit .266 with four doubles, one triple, two home runs, and a .293 on-base percentage on the year. The Golden Eagles were projected a fifth-place preseason ranking in the Ohio Valley Conference softball poll in the 2017 season. Tennessee Tech had a sixth-place finish last season.

Tennessee Tech owns a 10-5 lead in the series against Georgia Southern after taking a pair of wins last season in Starkville, Mississippi, in a season-opening tournament.

TTU's 2016 stats (PDF)
TTU's 2017 roster

SCOUTING UNCG
Last season, the Spartans finished with an overall record of 33-26, and a conference record of 9-9. UNCG had an exciting preseason with Junior Alicia Bazonski being selected as Southern Conference Preseason Pitcher of the Year as voted on by all seven league coaches. Bazonski appeared in 41 games for the Spartans last season, making 29 starts. The righty posted a 19-9 record with a 2.93 ERA. Senior Tory Wright also had a successful season, as she was the only member of the 2016 team to play and start in all 59 of UNCG's games. Wright made 426 putouts with four assists and just five errors at first base for a .989 fielding percentage.

Sophomore Stephanie Bryden is another one to watch with a batting average of .336 last season, appearing in 48 games and getting 42 starts. She also made 34 appearances in the circle posting a 12-14 record, and finishing her debut season with a 3.83 ERA. The Spartans will also be welcoming five new faces to the team. Hannah Stiltner, Makenna Matthijs, Rachel Johnson, Melanie Darges and Allison Mitchell were all apart of the 2017 signing class and look to add depth to the team. UNCG was picked tied with Mercer for third in the SoCon Preseason Coaches' Poll.

GS and UNCG have met 69 times with the Eagles owning a 48-21 lead in the series. A majority of those games came when both teams were members of the Southern Conference.

UNCG's 2016 stats (PDF)
UNCG's 2017 roster

UP NEXT
Next weekend, the Eagles will head to Baton Rouge, Louisiana, to participate in the LSU Purple & Gold Challenge. GS is scheduled to take on No. 4 LSU twice and Central Arkansas twice.

RANDOM STATS AND NOTES
Career Games Started - by position (active)
Emily Snider: 165 total - 165 OF
Morgan Robinson: 161 total - 161 1B
Alesha Mann: 109 total - 71 SS; 31 2B; 7 DP
Michelle Mazur: 52 total - 42 3B; 5 OF; 3 DP; 2 2B
Kierra Camp: 42 total - 42 P
Heather Felt: 16 total - 16 P
Hannah Farrell: 57 total - 57 3B
Lydia Witkowski: 55 total - 52 OF; 3 INF
India Davis: 52 total - 51 2B; 1 SS
Dixie Raley: 34 total - 34 P
Macy Weeks: 23 total - 13 DP; 10 OF
Haley Carter: 17 total - 10 OF; 7 DP

EAGLES BY STATE (20)
Georgia: 17
Florida: 1
Illinois: 1
Tennessee: 1
EAGLES BY CLASS (20)
Seniors: 5
Juniors: 5
Sophomores: 5 (2 redshirt)
Freshmen: 5

Players Mentioned

#4 Kierra Camp
P
5' 3"
Junior

#2 Haley Carter
OF
4' 10"
Redshirt Sophomore
#1 India Davis

INF  
5' 4"  
Junior

#14 Hannah Farrell

INF  
6' 1"  
Sophomore
#12 Heather Felt

P
5' 9"
Junior

#3 Alesha Mann

INF
5' 8"
Junior

#8 Michelle Mazur

UTL
5' 7"
Senior
#20 Dixie Raley

P
6' 0"
Sophomore

#21 Morgan Robinson

INF
5' 8"
Senior
#22 Emily Snider

OF/INF  
5' 8"  
Senior

Georgia Southern Athletics provides current information on all its sports through its official website, GSEagles.com, which is fully responsive across all mobile devices. Information on Eagle athletics can also be found through social media channels facebook.com/GSAthletics, twitter.com/GSAthletics and Instagram.com/GSAthletics. To purchase tickets to Georgia Southern athletics events, visit GSEagles.com/tickets.

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.