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SEASON PREVIEW: GS Swimming & Diving Building A Strong Team Mentality For 2017-18

Eagles open the season Saturday in Jacksonville, looking to compete for CCSA Championship and national meet spots

Swimming and Diving

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STATESBORO, Ga. - The Georgia Southern Swimming & Diving Team heads into the 2017-18 season looking to build a strong team dynamic under second-year Head Coach [Laura Thomas](#). The Eagles expect success to follow, challenging for a CCSA (Coastal Collegiate Sports Association) championship this campaign and that journey begins on Saturday when Georgia Southern competes against fellow CCSA foes FIU and North Florida in a swimming tri-meet in Jacksonville, Fla.

Coach Thomas' squad placed fourth out of 10 schools at the CCSA Championships in 2017, with many student-athletes setting new personal bests throughout the competition. The Eagles have 21 returners from last season's squad and add a talented group of 13 newcomers for the upcoming 2017-18 season, with 28 swimmers and six divers set to compete.

"The culmination of our season is the conference championships, and overall we weren't pleased with our fourth-place finish last season," Coach Thomas said. "We want to finish at least third. This year, we are working on becoming more of a unit, more of a team. I think once you do that, the results at the end of the season are going to

come.

"I'm real pleased with how things are coming along," Thomas said. "We're doing a lot of hard work and teambuilding. We help each other out as we're training, by cheering each other on through practices in the weight room or the pool. The mindset is, I'm swimming for my team. It helps out a lot, and I think all the girls welcome that."

In addition to the CCSA Championships, the ultimate goal is to have Georgia Southern swimmers and divers qualifying for the NCAA Championships. But Coach Thomas said there is a new national meet that will add another goal for the Eagles to shoot for.

"We'd like to have qualifiers for the NCAAs," Thomas said. "But this year is a new event, the [CSCAA] National Invitational, in Annapolis. If you win your conference event, individual or relay, you automatically get invited. If you make a B cut [provisional NCAA qualifying time, or B time], you get invited. This gives us a whole new fresh look at a national meet at the end of our season."

Four seniors are at the forefront of the returners for Coach Thomas this season, including All-CCSA swimmers [Amber Cortazzo](#) and [Kaylyn Thomas](#). Thomas already owns two individual and four relay school records in her standout career, while Cortazzo was a part of the 800 Free relay team that placed third at the 2017 CCSA Championships. Seniors [Madison Heydinger](#) and [Kiera McCormack](#) will also look to contribute in their final seasons and the Eagles have also added transfer [Zoe Peak](#) (Henderson State), who will swim for the Eagles this season as a graduate student.

"Our group of seniors have a huge opportunity to shape the future of this program," Thomas said. "I think emerged from last season with a sense of what we want our team dynamic to be, and they have embraced it."

A group of eight juniors are highlighted by All-CCSA swimmers [Rachel Pelzek](#) (200 Free Relay), [Courtney Schaefer](#) (800 Free Relay) and [Bre Stuart](#) (200 Medley Relay). [Anna Kassis](#), [Anna Rose Moore](#) and [Bri Mazzei](#) also reached CCSA finals in their respective events, while diver [Hannah Mudge](#) placed eighth in the 3-meter at the conference meet. Alabama transfer [Morgan Fleming](#) rounds out the group of juniors for the Eagles in 2017-18.

"I look to my upperclassmen for leadership, but it can come from anywhere," Thomas said. "I think our juniors are carrying that leadership over from last season and I know our underclassmen respect the time that they've put into the program."

Georgia Southern has 10 sophomores this season, led by CSCAA Scholar Honorable Mention All-American [Anna Moers](#), who earned a pair of All-CCSA relay honors last season, as well as diver [Gretchen Mossburg](#), who was twice the league's Diver of the Week while finishing sixth in the 1-meter and 3-meter at the conference championships as a freshman. [Mary James Coates](#) also reached the CCSA finals in the breaststroke, as did [Ashley Kubel](#) in the free, while diver [Markiyah Davis](#) joined Mossburg in the CCSA finals, placing 11th in the 1-meter. [Elizabeth Chemey](#), [Markie Duffy](#), [Abby Duncan](#), [Riha Moss](#) and Madison Sarankatos will also look to make strides in their second seasons with the Eagles.

"The sophomores were the first class I had contact with, and I think they came in with the right idea about what it means to be a team," Coach Thomas said. "They were a little intimidated at the beginning, but they performed great last year and coming into this season, they feel like they can make a big impact as leaders."

The largest group for Coach Thomas and the Eagles are the incoming freshman as 11 student-athletes will join Georgia Southern for their first collegiate seasons in the pool. The class shows great versatility with many swimmers excelling in multiple disciplines and also coming from many different parts of the US. The newest swimmers include: [Isabelle Bray](#) (Johns Creek, Ga.; IM/Breastroke), [Mackenzie Brown](#) (Prattville, Ala. / Freestyle/Butterfly); [Jaci Csubak](#) (Woodstock, Ga.; Breaststroke); [Klaudia Holt](#) (Lawrenceville, Ga.; Freestyle/Butterfly); [Katie Kennedy](#) (Bloomington, Ill.; Backstroke/IM); [Randi Kiser](#) (Clearwater, Fla.; Freestyle/Butterfly); [Katie Knight](#) (Bishop, Ga.; Diver); [Sarah Mohnkern](#) (Livonia, N.Y.; Diver); [Sara Rogers](#) (Jefferson, Ga.; Diver); [Ashlyn Steinbach](#) (Columbus, Ga.; Breaststroke) and [Jessica Ware](#) (Powder Springs, Ga.; Butterfly)

"This is the first group I was able to recruit to Georgia Southern, and they are amazing," Coach Thomas said. "They're hard working, talented, and already showing how strong they are in everything we do and we haven't even competed yet."

Saturday's meet in Jacksonville will be the start of a long season that Coach Thomas hopes will finish in March with several student-athletes advancing to the aforementioned national meets, whether it's the NCAAs or the CSCAA National Invitational. It will be a strong opportunity for her and all the Eagle coaching staff to see what kind of a team they've got.

"Unfortunately, the hurricane took away our first opportunity to compete with our intrasquad meet," Coach Thomas said. "So this is our first opportunity to see them race. I feel really good about it. I don't know what I'm going to see, but I'm excited to see it. They've been swimming great in practice, training really hard, and I think we will rise to the challenge. It will give me a better view of what we have and how our student-athletes react to competition."

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