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Georgia Southern University



Season Preview Part 2: Defense and Rebounding the Key for Men's Basketball

The Eagles open the season at Wake Forest Friday night.

Marc Gignac

Men's Basketball

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Second installment in a two-part men's basketball season preview. The Eagles open the campaign at Wake Forest Friday night.

[Part 1](#)

STATESBORO - They knew it while it was happening, the game film confirmed it and it has been the focus of the Georgia Southern men's basketball program since the conclusion of the 2016-17 campaign. When the Eagles defended and rebounded well, they had success. When they didn't, they struggled.

The Eagles have proven their ability on the offensive end and should have even greater firepower and depth this season, but to take the next step and make a run in the Sun Belt Tournament and maybe even further, they have to demonstrate their toughness, especially on the defensive end. They have to be a team of willing defenders and rebounders.

"I think we just have to embrace a dirty, grind-it-out game that's not going to be free flowing," said head coach [Mark Byington](#). "You have to be able to get stops, and that was the biggest thing for us last year. When we were successful, we were getting stops because our transition game on the other end is really good. We weren't as successful when we were taking the ball out of the net after they scored because we had to play more of a half-court, slowed-down game."

The Eagle team that advanced to the 2015 Sun Belt Championship game understood that, and Byington says that team was not as skilled offensively or as deep as the current squad. They had a knack for making plays at both ends of the floor, especially in tight games.

The Eagles have been one of the youngest teams in the country the last two years, and for the second year in a row, Georgia Southern returns 94 percent of its scoring and all five starters, including first-team All-Sun Belt selections [Ike Smith](#) and [Tookie Brown](#).

GS was picked fourth and Brown, Smith and [Mike Hughes](#) were named all-conference in the Sun Belt Preseason Poll, which is voted on by the league's 12 head coaches. Counting redshirt junior [Shawn O'Connell](#), the Eagles have five seniors on the roster.

"I'm excited about this group, and for the first time in a couple years, we have seniors," said Byington. "This senior class has been through a lot. These guys, as freshmen, were two points away from going to the NCAA Tournament, and I like the fact that they are going to have urgency. I'm hoping that urgency spreads to the younger guys."

Big men [B.J. Gladden](#), [Shawn O'Connell](#) and [Coye Simmons](#) make up the rest of the senior class and will be counted on to establish an inside presence for the Eagles.

Simmons is the consummate team player who does a lot of the dirty work that does not show up on the stat sheet. He played 15.2 minutes a game and averaged 2.3 points and 4.4 rebounds, while shooting 54 percent from the field.

"Coye is extremely valuable to the team and as a coach when you watch what he does day to day, you realize how important he is at his role and how unselfish he is at his role," said Byington. "He has great value to this team with his toughness, his rebounding and his physicality, and he's one of the best screeners in the country. I'm most proud of Coye because I think he's in the best shape he's ever been in. In the past, he's been able to go three or four conversions on the floor, but then he would hit a wall and get tired. Now he's at a point to where he's mentally stronger, does not get tired and fights through it."

O'Connell is versatile with the ability to run the floor and get to the offensive glass. He averaged 3.8 points and 2.8 rebounds in 12.7 minutes a game and started 10 contests. He shot 57 percent from the field and 70 percent from the free-throw line last year and averaged four points and 6.5 rebounds in the exhibition games.

"Shawn started out the season really well last year and then had a concussion and never really settled back in, and Shawn is one of the more athletic guys on our team and can really run and move and do different things," said Byington. "With Shawn, it's just having the confidence and staying healthy and being able to make impactful plays, which he has shown he can do."

[B.J. Gladden](#) is another long, athletic, versatile wing who averaged 20 minutes a game last year. He tallied 5.5 points and 4.2 rebounds a contest, scored in double-figures in six games and led the team in rebounding four times.

"It took a while for B.J. to adjust last year," said Byington. "He had good moments, he started five games for us and he's a guy who is a multidimensional guy that we like. He had a great summer, and I think he's shooting the ball better. He does a great job of getting by guys and getting to the paint, and I think he could be a very good defensive player."

[Montae Glenn](#) took a step forward in his sophomore campaign and is expected to make an even bigger leap as a junior. He averaged 5.4 points and 4.9 rebounds in 18.8 minutes a game and made 21 starts. Glenn ranked fourth in the Sun Belt in offensive rebounds with 2.79 a contest, the most for the Eagles since 2004, and shot 59 percent from the field. He averaged 8.5 points and five rebounds in the exhibition games.

"I'm really proud of how everybody has gotten better and certain guys have taken gigantic steps, but no one has improved more since last year than [Montae Glenn](#)," said Byington. "He's dedicated to how he's eating, to how he's training. He's able to run much better, he's more athletic and he's really able to push himself a lot harder. Montae has been our best back to the basket post guy the last couple years, and his progression probably has been the best of anybody on the team. His hard work has shown off in the workouts and practices."

[Tyshaun Crawford](#) may be one of the most ballyhooed Georgia Southern recruits in some time simply because of his size. He is a legit 7-footer, and the first on a Georgia Southern roster since Emmett Smith played for the Eagles from 1989-91. His high school coach, Willie Reese, and AAU coach, James Forrest, both played four seasons at Georgia Tech for legendary coach Bobby Cremins, who served as Byington's mentor at College of Charleston.

"Tyshaun is one of those guys who from the first day he walked on campus, I just told him to be better tomorrow than you were today, and the good news is that he's lived up to it," said Byington. "He's made great strides with our strength coach, Cody, in advancing his body and conditioning and he's just got to be able to catch up to the speed of our game. He has a great attitude, he loves basketball and if he stays motivated and we stay patient, we're going to have a really good player."

The Eagles have another long, athletic, versatile big guy waiting in the wings in [Simeon Carter](#), who offers a 7-foot-1 wingspan. He transferred in from Iowa State, will sit out this season and be a junior in eligibility for 2018-19.

"Simeon is as talented a post player as I think we've had here in a long time, and as he learns to dedicate himself to the game, then we'll get the rewards of it two years from now," said Byington. "The most important thing about Simeon right now is his energy level and communication skills bring another level to our practice. He's brought great energy and enthusiasm to our practices, and it's raised the level of how we compete against each other."

The Sun Belt Conference looks to be in line for a banner year as 11 of the 15 student-athletes who earned all-conference honors in 2017 are back in uniform. UTA, which won the regular-season title, was picked to repeat as league champions, and Troy, last season's tourney champ, returns its top two scorers, and was picked third.

"When you're in it as a coach and you're watching some of these other teams on tape, the talent jumps out at you," said Byington. "I think this year can really be the best year Sun Belt basketball has ever had, and I think it's going to be a top-10 league in the country. It's going to be extremely challenging, which I think is going to be fun, but there's not going to be easy nights, and you're going against really good players every single time you play in Sun Belt."

The Eagles have not won a Sun Belt tourney game since that senior-laden squad of 2015, and Byington believes losses in the first round the last two seasons are extra motivation for his squad. He and the coaching staff have seen his guys demonstrate a greater focus throughout the offseason.

"I think the scars of the past will help motivate us this year," said Byington. "We've done great things here - finishing third last year is admirable - but I think our guys are motivated for much higher things. In the past, guys would talk about their effort, but we've visually been able to see in actions their motivation and their hunger this year."

Sometimes the shots do not fall for a spell in the pressure-packed atmosphere of tournament basketball, and teams rely on their defense until they can right the ship or they use their defense to create easy offense. The Eagles will need that kind of weapon in their arsenal come March.

"One of the challenges of younger teams is understanding the importance of defense and playing in tournament games, where defense and rebounding are extremely important," said Byington. "Older guys get it. The last time we had a senior-laden team a couple years ago, we were one of the top-20 defensive teams in the country because they got it. These guys are starting to get it, and it's still a major emphasis for us."

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](#).