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# Season in Review: Eagle Softball Makes Strides With Young Team

*2016 Squad ended season with 30 wins, including marquee victories*



Bryan Johnston

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## Story Links

**STATESBORO, Ga.** – 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.

"I was happy with the progress we made throughout the year," Smith said. "I felt like we continued to get better as the season went on. We had some big wins for the program: beating the eighth-ranked team in the country in UL Lafayette and we were the first Georgia Southern softball team to beat South Carolina. We were also one of just two teams to beat everybody in the conference at least once this season, and we competed day in and day out."

Smith, who has been at the helm of the program for five years now, earned her 150<sup>th</sup> career win during the campaign and is now the only coach in Georgia Southern history to record four 30-win seasons.

The 2016 team played a tough schedule that included four Southeastern Conference opponents and five games featured on the SEC Network+. The Eagles also participated in five regular-season tournaments, including winning all four games of their own Eagle Classic. Throughout the season, GS played 10 teams currently ranked inside the top-75 of the RPI, including four inside the top-25, and played three teams that were nationally ranked at the time. The Eagles also played six teams that earned berths into the NCAA tournament and beat four of those teams, including earning three of those wins on the road as well as a win over UL Lafayette which is headed to the NCAA Super Regional Round.

"I want us to play the best teams out there and I want us to play the best softball we can," Smith said. "It's great for the team because they work hard and get rewarded for that work and know that they can compete with anybody in the country. They showed that over and over again this season. We're a young team, so it's a lot to learn how to win and how to compete at the highest level."

"Giving our players the opportunity to compete at that level helps them in a lot of ways including understand how to play the game better, on a bigger stage and with more speed, but it also gives us a chance to help with honors and recognition." Smith continued. "I want our team to have those experiences of going into tough environments as a way to prepare them for our conference schedule. I was really proud of how we played at Texas A&M because they were 10<sup>th</sup> in the country at the time and we went blow-for-blow with them for 14 innings. Against South Carolina, it was a great team win and it's just awesome to watch our players go out there and be able to accomplish things like that."

The Eagles started their second go-around in the Sun Belt by claiming their first four series, including the opening series on the road at eventual NCAA participant Texas State. For much of the season, Georgia Southern was as high as third in the conference standings. GS took series over the Bobcats, UT Arlington, UL Monroe and swept their three-game series against long-time rival Appalachian State.

"The Sun Belt is a tough league, two of our teams made the NCAA tournament and we potentially could have had three make it," Smith said. "As a conference, I think this league can have four make it down the road. This season, I saw us competing very well."

We won on the road, including claiming the Texas State series the first weekend. Taking that series was great for us and it gave the team confidence knowing we can compete with anybody in the conference."

The Eagles ended the season sixth in the conference standings and earned their second berth to the Sun Belt Conference Tournament in as many years where they faced UL Monroe in the first round.

Statistically, the 2016 team climbed up the ranks in the record book, finishing in the top-five in program history in eight offensive categories. GS ended the season tied for most times hit by pitch, tied for second in slugging percentage (.408) and on-base percentage (.352) and tied for third in home runs (44) as well as third out-right in batting average (.278). The Eagles also ended the season fourth for runs scored (242) and runs batted in (214) and were fifth in total bases (614).

Individually, senior [A.J. Hamilton](#), juniors [Emily Snider](#) and [Morgan Robinson](#), redshirt freshman [Lydia Witkowski](#) and true freshman [Dixie Raley](#) all left their marks in the record book. Hamilton, who graduated this spring with a degree in psychology after starting all four years of her career as the Eagles' catcher, ended her career sixth all-time with 24 home runs and tied for seventh all-time for games played with 227. Her final home run, the 10<sup>th</sup> of the season for her which is tied for seventh all-time, came on Senior Day and helped the Eagles take a 2-0 victory over the eighth-ranked Ragin' Cajuns of UL Lafayette. It is the highest-ranked team that any Eagle softball squad has ever defeated.

"I'm really proud of what A.J. has done both in softball as well as in the classroom," Smith said. "She earned a 4.00 grade point average for the year, she graduated and is going to start grad school and it's just great for her to end her career on a high note. You want to develop leaders and she has been that for us. She was a great teammate and that's what you really want to be remembered as. She did a lot of great things to help this program and kept us steady through all of it. She also had some great experiences along the way: winning the SoCon tournament and going to regionals in 2013, winning a regular-season title in 2014, the big wins we've had, all capped by hitting a home run at home, against UL Lafayette on Senior Day. I'm excited to see where she goes from here. She's gotten to experience a lot of great things in her career and I have really appreciated everything she's done for us."

Snider and Robinson both also climbed the career record ranks. Snider is currently sixth all-time with 102 career runs scored while Robinson is fifth in runs batted in with 106 for her career. Robinson ended the campaign third all-time with 48 RBI while Witkowski ended the season tied for third in program history with five triples on the year and eighth all-time for a single season with 39 runs scored.

Raley, who entered the final weekend of the regular-season in the top-five in the country for wins by a freshman pitcher, ended the season in the top-10 in program history in seven different pitching categories and set the program record for wins by a freshman. Her 2016 campaign ranks second all-time for games pitched (43) and wins (22), is third

for games started (34) as well as saves (3), tied for fifth in strikeouts (182), tied for seventh in complete games (24) and is ninth for innings pitched (202.0).

Following the season, Raley was named the Sun Belt Conference Freshman of the Year as well as an All-SBC First-Team selection. Snider and [Taylor Rogers](#) also earned All-Sun Belt Second-Team honors. It was the second year in a row for Rogers to earn the honor and she was also named to the Sun Belt's Preseason All-Conference Team prior to the start of the season.

"This is a tough league with a lot of good players," Smith said. "For our players to get those honors means a lot. I'm really happy and proud of Dixie for being named the Freshman of the Year as well as being named first-team all-conference, as well as Emily for getting all-conference honors as an outfielder. Also, the respect that Taylor has earned to not just be named to the all-conference team once, but to get it again and to be named to the preseason all-conference team really says a lot. I'm really happy for all three of them for earning those honors, but it says a lot about the rest of the team because everything you do you're not doing alone."

The best thing for Smith and those following the Eagles is how young the team is. Georgia Southern graduates just one player in Hamilton, but stands to return as many as 17 players, including five who were either true freshmen or redshirt freshman and six sophomores.

Even with the success on the field, Smith and the Eagles realize that none of this could happen without the support of the local community and Eagle Nation.

"I want to thank our fans because they have created a great environment that is very positive," Smith said. "They have continued to support us and I think they saw some great games this season. We really appreciate them coming out and sitting in the sun on hot days. It really has a positive impact having the support of our fans the way we do. We are really looking forward to seeing them again next year."

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