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# Georgia Southern University Athletics



## SEASON PREVIEW: Georgia Southern Softball Eager To Continue Last Year's Momentum

Eagles were flying high when COVID-19 halted the 2020 season and expect to keep soaring even higher in 2021

Softball

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**STATESBORO** - Like many spring sports programs across the nation, the Georgia Southern softball team feels like the upcoming 2021 season is considered to be unfinished business.

When the March 12th decision came down to halt the 2020 campaign, there was an incredible sense of loss that for many that will never be made up. Head Coach [Kim Dean](#) and the Eagles, however, are trying to treat the upcoming season as much of an extension of 2020 as it is a brand new season as well.

"It's definitely a combination of the two," Dean said. "I think we understand what was taken from us, so there's a different motivation behind finishing strong that includes last year. Some of the goals and things of that nature that we had last year, have transitioned to this year as well. However, this is a new team. We have six new kids, and even the returners are different this year. So it's an extension of last year, but with new opportunities."

Georgia Southern had a 14-10 overall record and a 2-1 mark in the Sun Belt Conference when play halted in 2020. So just that opportunity to prepare for a full season has the Eagles excited about what 2021 will bring.

"Our biggest goal is to play as many games as we can, to remain as healthy as we can be," Dean said. "To be as competitive as we can be, and to achieve those goals - everything else is a byproduct of how we get that done. It's all based on attitude."

The Eagles took giant strides offensively in 2020, as Georgia Southern ranked among the Sun Belt's leaders in batting average (.289), on-base percentage (.385) and slugging percentage (.444). Coach Dean expects that production - and improvement - to continue.

"Our style, our grit and grind, is that we're going to beat you in a lot of different ways," Coach Dean said. "We have so much pop in our bats, but we also have smart hitters. Some of our best hitters know how to draw the walks. And when we have runners on, we're a threat to score every time. Our team has a knack for hitting the ball hard, and that's all we're concerned about. Drive gaps, and hit the ball hard."

The hard-hitting lineup begins at the top with 2021 Preseason All-Conference center fielder [Mekhia Freeman](#), who returns for her fifth year of eligibility. Freeman leads an experienced group of outfielders that also features fellow fifth-year [Shayla Smith](#) and junior [Jess Mazur](#). Added to that group in 2021 are freshmen [Madi Banks](#) and [Sydney Harris](#) as well as returners [Shelby Barfield](#), [Ashleigh Dufy](#) and [Mary Grace Howard](#).

"Mekhia and Shayla are outstanding leaders," Coach Dean said. "Mekhia is one of the best center fielders I've ever coached, but she has a great ability to understand the game and teach it to her teammates. She makes spectacular plays under the lights, but she's also doing those day in and day out at practice. Shayla is improving so much after being put in the outfield last year. She's also doing a great job of helping our younger kids understand the steps she took. Playing outfield is not just 'go be fast and catch a ball,' and they buy into that."

The infield group all returns from 2020, which was a big difference from the previous season in which three of the four new starters were freshmen. Junior first baseman [Faith Shirley](#) is the dean of the group, with sophomore [Ashlynn Gunter](#) at second base, sophomore [Olivia Creamer](#) at shortstop and freshman [Bailee Wilson](#) at third rounding out the returners. Barfield and freshmen [Aniston Johnson](#) and [Jaelyn Darley](#) are part of the infield group as well, with fifth-year senior [Alia Booth](#) providing depth at first base.

"Last year, our average age [in the infield] was 18.5," Coach Dean said. "This year, we're 19.5. But it really gives me goosebumps, knowing how exciting this group can be. And we have some really strong freshmen coming in as well. Our middle is solidified with Ashlynn and Olivia, they've really worked hard. It's awesome watching how fast the game was to them last year as freshman, how so much slower it is this year. And all of our returners taking our freshmen under their wings, so that the freshmen are learning even faster."

The catching corps for the Eagles may be the deepest and most talented that Coach Dean has had in her four years in Statesboro, led by sophomore [Janai Conklin](#) and senior [Allyssah Mullis](#). Sophomore [Linzie Lafavor](#) and freshman [Dejah Mills](#) give the Eagles a diverse group that Coach Dean says is 'one of the coolest groups to be around.'

"We laugh about it all the time," Coach Dean says. "Their personalities are so different, but legitimately when they get into the bullpen and they're catching together, they are using bullpen sessions to better themselves. Every rep, they're trying to get better at something, and they thoroughly enjoy the idea of being the eyes and ears of the field."

Even with last year's abbreviated season, the Eagles had seven different pitchers throw at least one inning, and that depth will again be to Georgia Southern's advantage in 2021. Senior [Rylee Waldrep](#) and sophomore [Aaliyah Garcia](#) formed the 1-2 punch, but the Eagles also expect to get consistent contributions from sophomore [Kyleigh Richardson](#), senior [Harlee Lewis](#) and freshman [Anna Feil](#), while position players [Shelby Barfield](#) and [Jess Mazur](#) are also available.

"I think the pitchers really took some of the time that the pandemic granted us to get healthy, get motivated and continue to work," Coach Dean said. "They all came into the Fall well ahead of where they were last Fall. I was really impressed with that, it just shows another level of commitment. They really did their part to continue to develop and grow. But with being better than they were last Fall, it comes a different set of expectations as well. We expect a lot out of them this year."

Georgia Southern will play in three tournaments in the non-conference portion of the schedule, hosting the Bash in the Boro and the Eagle Round Robin as well as traveling to No. 7 Florida for the UF Bubly Invitational. A weekend series at North Florida will also help the Eagles prepare for the beginning of Sun Belt Conference play, which begins with a bang as Georgia Southern opens at No. 9 Louisiana on March 12.

"Our non-conference schedule prepares us for the rigors of the Sun Belt," Coach Dean said. "That's the way you have to look at it. We have to understand that a win on February 12 does not mean a win on May 1. Winning helps, but we've got to continue to push through and use each inning to build what we hope will become a very dynamic, very explosive, very hard team to beat for when March 12 gets here. As a coaching staff, we work to find teams that keep challenging us, to find out where we stand. So that come the end of the non-conference schedule, we are able to sit down and say, 'This is where we're great, this is where we can be a little better' before we go take on one of the toughest softball conferences in the country."

The motivation for success hasn't changed in year four for Coach Dean, but it has probably added a little bit of intensity. And a lot of that comes down to the three fifth-year seniors who elected to return for the 2021 campaign.

"Whatever inning is our last with this group, we want to be able to hug each other, and to say that we'd go through it all again," Coach Dean said. "But I want to be able to say to our fifth-year seniors that they started a different chapter here. I want them to feel that sense of gratitude and pride. I want that for all of our girls, but I saw how hungry our returning seniors were, and there's a part of me that wants to do great things for them this year. When that last out is called, I want a ton of girls that have tears in their eyes, but smiles on their faces, that they knew they gave it everything they had."

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