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3-2-2020

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### Recommended Citation

Georgia Southern University, "Men's Basketball Seniors Set to Finish Strong" (2020). *Athletics News*. 2783. <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/athletics-news-online/2783>

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**AJ Henderson - Georgia Southern**

*Ike Smith ranks second on the school's all-time Division I scoring list.*

## Men's Basketball Seniors Set to Finish Strong

**The Eagles cap the regular season against Arkansas State Tuesday night in Hanner.**

By Marc Gignac  
3/2/2020 9:23:00 AM

**STATESBORO** – Ike Smith could be playing basketball for money right now.

Just like his former teammates Tookie Brown and Montae Glenn, the guys who were in his freshman class when he came to Georgia Southern, Smith could be earning a good living in Europe or South America or any number of places around the world.

Saddled with an injury 10 games into his “first” senior season last year, Smith had to make a tough decision – come back at 75-80 percent for the last two weeks of the season or take a medical redshirt and get healthy for a full “second” senior year.

“It was very tough because I wanted to finish it with the guys I came in with in Tookie and Montae,” Smith says. “It was a very tough decision, but with the rehab process, it was best for me to stay another year.”

The fifth-year senior is extremely content with the decision he made.

“I believe it was worth it because I got another chance to compete for a championship, so I feel like that’s worth everything,” he says.

Smith is one of six seniors who will be honored on Senior Night Tuesday when the Eagles play their final regular-season home contest against Arkansas State at 7 p.m. in Hanner Fieldhouse. He joins Simeon Carter, Isaiah Crawley, Trey Dawkins, David-Lee Jones Jr. and Jordan Walker, and the Senior Day ceremony will take place prior to tipoff.

Smith has the longest tenure of the group at Georgia Southern. At 130 and counting, he has played in more games than anyone in the history of the program and will finish second to Brown on the school’s career Division I scoring list and one of four Eagles ranked in the top 10 in scoring and rebounding in the D-I era. The long and sometimes bumpy road has taught him quite a bit.

“I’ve learned everything is not going to go your way so you have to stay the course and keep getting better so you can get to where you want to be,” he says.

His fondest memories are not of a particular game or road trip but rather the friendships he has made with his teammates and coaches in addition to those he has cultivated around the campus and Statesboro communities.

“The thing that sticks out to me is just forming relationships with different people and different personalities, he says. “It’s been fun and something I’ve enjoyed.”



*Simeon Carter started playing organized basketball as a junior in high school.*

Jones Jr. and Crawley came to Southern via the junior college route, and Carter transferred in as a junior from Iowa State. Walker started as a practice player before earning the right to don a uniform in the second semester of his junior season. All their paths to Statesboro are different, but Carter’s might be the most unique.

He hit a growth spurt prior to eighth grade, going from 5-foot-7 to 6-foot-2, and in high school at West Charlotte, he was a member of the swim team as a freshman. Because he had family in the service, he participated in JROTC but had to give it up because they could not find any pants that fit him. He started playing organized basketball prior to his junior year, and at 6-foot-8 with soft hands, a 7-foot-1 wingspan, elite athleticism and speed, he started his career in the Big 12.

In just two years at Georgia Southern, he has 437 points and 78 blocked shots, which ranks ninth on the school's all-time list. He admits that he has grown a lot at Georgia Southern, both on and off the court.

"I worked a lot on my game here, and I feel like I've come a long way in a lot of different areas and aspects," he says.



*Isaiah Crawley has become the team's vocal leader.*

Crawley is from a small town in Tennessee called Ripley, calls Statesboro a city and says it is double the size of where he grew up. He has tallied 730 points and 338 rebounds in two years and shot over 56 percent in each of his seasons at Georgia Southern. Named a team captain in October, he is the team's vocal leader and a huge reason why the Eagles have won five of their last seven heading into Tuesday's game. It is a role he relishes.

"It's actually been pretty fun learning how people think," says Crawley. "I took leadership classes last semester, and they really broadened my instincts on how to lead and what certain ways you can use to lead people. With different personalities and guys coming from different places, you have to learn different ways to lead."

All six seniors will look to continue playing next season with five entering the professional ranks. Walker will graduate from Georgia Southern in May with a 3.3 grade point average in information technology and seek to be a graduate transfer, where he can garner more playing time while beginning work on his master's degree.

As for 10 years down the road when their basketball careers are over?

“Giving back,” says Jones Jr., whose hobby is writing screenplays. “There's a lot of kids who don't have a platform to speak, and I can be a mentor to them and have a voice for them.”

“Training kids,” says Smith. “That's kind of been my dream. I find excitement in stuff like that. Playing for so long, I know a lot about the game, so I want to be able to teach the younger generation the game of basketball.”

“When that's over, I want to coach,” says Dawkins “I'll have four or five kids, a wife and be coaching high school for sure.”



*Trey Dawkins plans on becoming a high school coach when his professional playing career is over.*

That they harbor those aspirations says a lot about their character. When asked what they want Eagle Nation to say about them when their careers are over, some common themes emerged.

“I want people to know that I worked hard and that I was a fighter,” says Jones Jr. “I went through a lot, and I want people to know that I fought and tried to be an inspiration to just keep fighting and keep pushing.”

“He's a good person,” says Dawkins. “He's selfless and helped people out, and he was a fun guy.”

“I want people to say that ‘he gave it his all and that he was good person on and off the court,’” says Smith.

Because of the format of the Sun Belt Tournament, the Eagles will play an extra home game this season and host a tourney game in Hanner Fieldhouse either March 9 or 11 (see below). It will be the first conference tourney game in Hanner since the 1992 TAAC Championship game, a 92-82 Eagle

win over Georgia State March 11.

It is the time of the year when seniors see the light at the end of the tunnel, play with maybe just a little bit more urgency, live in the moment and rise to the occasion. The Eagles believe they are peaking at the right time.

“If we all buckle down and get on the same page and take our time and play our game - not have anybody step out of their comfort zone at the wrong time - I feel like we can go all the way,” says Carter.

“I'm not satisfied,” says Jones. Jr. “We have things to accomplish, and I have things to accomplish. Finish strong.”

### **Sun Belt Tournament Scenarios**

The Eagles can be no higher than the third seed and no lower than the fifth seed in the upcoming Sun Belt Tournament. If No. 3 or 4, Georgia Southern will host a game March 11 in Hanner Fieldhouse, and the tipoff time will be 7:30 p.m. If the No. 5 seed, GS will host a game in Hanner March 9 at 7 p.m.

#### *Eagles' path to the third seed*

Defeat Arkansas State, South Alabama loses to Texas State.

#### *Eagles' path to the fourth seed*

Defeat Arkansas State, South Alabama defeats Texas State OR Georgia State loses to Little Rock.

Georgia Southern will be the fifth seed if they lose to Arkansas State and Georgia State defeats Little Rock.