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Where Are They Now? Mary Evans, Women's Basketball

In our latest segment of "Where Are They Now?" we catch up with Mary Perry (Evans). Mary was a two-sport athlete at Georgia Southern, playing women's basketball from 1995-99, while also competing for the women's soccer team beginning in 1996. She played in 110 games over her four seasons for the women's basketball program, scoring 706 points while dishing out 210 assists. Mary shot a career-best 41.4% from three-point range as a senior in 1998-99 while leading the team in assists with 99. On February 1, 1999, she went 6-for-6 from three-point range against Chattanooga, which remains the school's best single-game three-point shooting performance to this day.

Mary graduated from Georgia Southern with her bachelor's degree in exercise science in 2000. From there, she embarked on a coaching journey that took her to several schools, including a stop back in Statesboro as an assistant coach for the Eagles from 2007-12. The opportunity to become a head coach finally came for Mary in April of 2018, when she became the eighth head coach in school history at Valparaiso. In her second season at the helm of the Crusaders, she led the team to a sixth seed in the Missouri Valley Conference tournament, the highest seeding since Valparaiso joined the league.





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Much like many other schools across the nation, the Valparaiso season ended due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but not before Mary had led the squad to a 17-12 overall record - with the 17 wins representing the most by a Valpo team since the 2006-07 campaign and the 10th-most in a single season in program history. The improvement from her first season of +10.5 wins was tied for the sixth-best single-season turnaround in NCAA Division I.

We had the chance to sit down - virtually - with Mary and chat about her journey to Georgia Southern, her playing and coaching career, and what her time in Statesboro meant to her personally and professionally.



1. You played both soccer and basketball at Georgia Southern, how did that come about?

I came as a freshman, and I was there just to play basketball. I had grown up playing soccer, but I did not play really in high school until my senior year. It was just kinda something fun to do my senior year. I really enjoyed it, though. So I got down there as a freshman, got through my freshman season and met a few of the soccer players. They had an incident where they lost a keeper really late in the spring. They were kinda searching for somebody. The coach [Head Coach Tom Norton] asked me if I'd mind coming out and training a little bit, seeing if I could do the job. I spent probably a month training with Coach [Kevin] Chambers. They decided I was ok enough to do it, so I did it.

2. Did you always want to get into coaching, and when you made that decision, was it always going to be basketball?

Yes, it was always going to be basketball. I had a couple of different ideas of what I wanted to do, when I grew up and when I got to Georgia Southern. They changed throughout the course of my time there. I ended up finishing as an exercise science major. Did an internship with that down in Florida, it was a strength and conditioning internship. I really enjoyed that coaching piece, maybe not so much the strength & conditioning part [laughs] Well I enjoyed that, but, for me, the actual day-to-day interaction with the athletes down there. It was a junior tennis and golf facility. So when I came back after my internship, I wanted to get my master's degree. We started looking at graduate assistant spots, and I did look in both basketball and soccer because at that point I was just trying to get a master's degree paid for. Basketball worked out, I went out to Colorado for a year, and really enjoyed it, then had an opportunity of a lifetime. I had a friend from high school who had taken a job at Seton Hall. Called me about an opening. helped me with that situation. got that job and i think that's where i grew my passion for coaching and working under [Head Coach Phyllis] Mangina up there. I just really fell in love with the game of basketball, and working with young people, and I've never looked back since.



3. What maybe one or two of your biggest memories of playing basketball at Georgia Southern?

I think probably the biggest one was my junior year, winning the SoCon. It was my best moment and my worst moment, because we won the regular season and you have those memories of cutting down the nets in Hanner, being surrounded by our families and our friends and our fans. We just had a great, great season that year. Then we headed up to Greensboro, really ran through the tournament and got into the Championship Game, thought we played really really well, but had a rough second half and ended up losing that game. My goal as a college athlete was to make the NCAA tournament. All I wanted to do was win that Championships and make the NCAA tournament. That was the year we had the

people to do it. To kind of have that taken away, and to be so close, was really heart-wrenching. But it was just a fantastic season, and I got to play with a great group of young women that we still stay in touch.

Other than that, it's the friends I made, the people I worked with. There's such a sense of community there. It's changed a lot over the years, but I had fantastic professors that I still stay in touch with. Coach Chambers is still in admissions. I was actually down there last summer, I had a house down there so I was checking in on it, so I got to sneak by and say hi to Coach Chambers, kind of surprised him. Just amazing, amazing people down there. I thoroughly enjoyed my time going to school there.

4. Your assistant coaching journey brought you back to Statesboro in 2007. Talk a bit about the difference being a coach at Georgia Southern, and being a student-athlete at Georgia Southern.

It's very different, and I would say over the years, the school and the university and the town has changed so drastically. When I was in school there, it was a smaller community, there wasn't nearly as much stuff - I know that's hard to believe because people probably still think it's still Small Town U.S.A., but it was even Smaller Town U.S.A. back then. I think the only chain restaurant we had at the time was Applebee's. It was just a lot different. Coming back as an assistant coach and seeing how much Statesboro had grown was really cool, but it had not lost that sense of community. That sense of caring. There were still so many people who helped me as a student-athlete that were still there. I thoroughly enjoyed my time there when I came back, being a part of the community and seeing that part of things, that maybe I didn't entrench myself as a student-athlete. Going through that, it was a great run as an assistant coach. I got to meet my husband and got married, so there were a lot of positive things that happened for me when I came back to Statesboro.

Coming back as an assistant coach and seeing how much Statesboro had grown was really cool, but it had not lost that sense of community. That sense of caring.

5. After more than 15 years as an assistant coach, you got the opportunity to become the head coach at Valparaiso. Talk about how that opportunity came about, and making that decision to take that next step.

It was a tough decision. I wasn't exactly looking for a head coaching position the year it happened. I was in a really good situation at Ohio University. I had an amazing boss, we had probably two or three of the best seasons in school history, and we'd gone to the NCAA tournament. In that last year I was there, we graduated a big class. We were incorporating a group of freshman and had a rebuild year, but it was a great year, it was a fun year. We had a great group of freshman talent and we knew how good we were going to be for years to come. We went down to the West Virginia state tournament, my boss and I, and he mentioned Valparaiso. I said - eh, I'm not really that interested [laughs]. And then the call came, I spoke with the athletic director there, and the more he spoke, the more I realized that this was the place that aligned with the things I wanted to build my program around, what the school's about, and how the university treats their student-athletes. How they look at what athletics is within a college environment, really aligned with what I think it should look like. I came out and visited, fell in love with the university, and I was very fortunate that they offered me the opportunity to be the next coach here.

Every day I've spent here, I've realized how much I'm supposed to be here. It's been a fantastic opportunity.

6. Your second season at Valparaiso was the best single season record in more than a decade. How excited are you about the program you're building there?

I'm really excited, I think it's a fantastic university that has great academic options for student-athletes. I talk to recruits all the time that you get a small college environment, but you get to play big time athletics. The Missouri Valley is an extremely difficult conference for women's basketball traditionally. They've had a few years where they were down, but they're back; it's a grind, it's fun. I think it allows us to recruit a special type of player. A higher level player than I would've at other universities. The kids I've been fortunate enough to take over, they've bought in and they're fantastic people. And that's why we've had the success. They're passionate about being good at everything they do. They're great students, they're great athletes, they're great people. They treat each other really well, they've worked and worked and worked to have the success they had this year. I'm excited to continue to recruit those kinds of players and continue to work on the culture that they've built here even before I got here off the court and I think we've taken some big steps to change the culture on the court and the way that they see themselves on the court.

7. Any final words for Eagle Nation?

I'm always going to be an Eagle, I love Georgia Southern. It's been a blessing to bump up to Sun Belt football because I get to watch you guys every week. Watch the team, throw my Georgia Southern gear back on and be an Eagle fan. I'm thankful for my time there. I just want to say thanks to everyone who helped me come there initially, and the people that helped me come back as a coach. Georgia Southern will forever be a special place in my heart.