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**AJ Henderson - Georgia Southern**

**Southern Staff Stories: Coretta Brown, Women's Basketball**

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You can go home again.

For Georgia Southern Assistant Women's Basketball Coach Coretta Brown, that opportunity follows a journey that took the Statesboro resident and Southeast Bulloch High School graduate to the highest level of competition collegiately and professionally before delving into a coaching career that has seen stops throughout the Southeast.

When Head Coach Anita Howard was looking to fill out her staff after taking the Georgia Southern position in April of last year, Brown called to congratulate her on landing the position in her hometown. That phone call would lead to a spot on her staff less than a month later.

"I had known Coach Howard previously, as we had worked a camp over in Japan together," Brown said. "I called her and said, 'I'm from Statesboro, you need to bring me home!'"

Coach Howard had looked at bringing Brown on board to her staff at Columbus State, but at the time, she was working for former Georgia Southern head coach Rusty Cram's staff at West Alabama. The move to the Eagles, however, provided the easy opportunity to bring Brown back to Statesboro.



### ***Local Legend***

When Brown began her high school career at Southeast Bulloch, she had already garnered attention from collegiate coaches across the country. And for a program - and an area - that had not experienced a lot of success in girls basketball, it became an event to watch her play for the Yellow Jackets.

"My first recruiting letter, was on the first day of my first year of high school," Brown said. "I had this awesome flyer on my desk that said 'We're excited about your high school journey.' I was overwhelmed in ninth grade."

Josh Aubrey, who covered Brown during her high school days and still covers area sports for the Statesboro Herald, remembers the buzz surrounding her as she moved into high school.

"I'd heard stories about her at middle school," Aubrey said. "Playing with the boys, and just knowing she was going to be good. And her freshman year, she definitely stormed onto the scene. She was very thin, but I had never seen a girl who could handle the ball with both hands as well as she did. And on top of that, you could tell she knew the game in a way that not many people do. You could tell she was a special player."

The attention grew as her exploits grew, taking Southeast Bulloch to the State tournament each season. By her junior year, many of the top coaches across the nation could be found in the long wooden

bleachers of the gymnasium, including the late Pat Summitt, from the University of Tennessee and Sylvia Hatchell, from the University of North Carolina.

You could tell she knew the game in a way that not many people do. You could tell she was a special player.

Hatchell would be the coach who would eventually land the prized recruit, and according to the Women's Basketball Hall of Famer, the family aspect went a long way to proving that North Carolina was the right fit.

"I remember, we flew into a little airport outside of Savannah for her home visit, and drove out to her home," Hatchell said. "We visited with her parents and her grandparents, and of course her mother fed us! The house was out in the country and I couldn't help but think that she was a great kid from a great family. My only concern was that she had a couple of sisters who attended Duke, which was our rival. But I felt there was just this great chemistry between her family, me and my staff."

The recruitment could have lasted all four years, but Brown signed early with the Tar Heels - as much as anything so it would not be a distraction for her senior season.

"By the time I was a junior, I was over it," Brown said about the recruiting process. "I was being bombarded every day. And my mom was the type of mom where I had to talk to every single coach who wrote to me. It was a lot for me, almost overwhelming. So I signed early, because there was no way I wanted to play my senior season dealing with that. I wanted to focus on playing."

And focus she did, averaging 24.5 points, 5.5 rebounds and 4.5 assists per game en route to earning Gatorade Player of the Year honors for the state of Georgia.

"She just didn't have triple-doubles, she had quadruple-doubles," Aubrey recounts. "One game where I was keeping stats, she just missed a quintuple double - points, rebounds, assists, steals and she finished with eight blocks, just two away. That's how well rounded a player she was."

### ***Chapel Hill***

The college career of Coretta Brown began like so many others. Dreams of starting immediately took a back seat to the reality that playing time has to be earned, not given.

"Coming in as freshman, I was all 'let's go!' but I ended up sitting the bench a lot. Of course, we were sitting behind Olympians, you know?"

Jennifer Lynne Williams, who was the college teammate and roommate of Brown's during her freshman and sophomore seasons, remembers that well. Now the Athletic Director at Alabama State University,

Williams - like Brown - came to Chapel Hill with a load of honors from high school, including earning Gatorade Player of the Year honors for the state of Michigan from her time at Detroit Country Day.

"We had a level of expectation to make an immediate impact," Williams said. "I was able to play a lot as a freshman, but I was benched my sophomore year. Coretta didn't play a lot as a freshman, but started to play more as a sophomore. We could relate with our experiences."

The lack of playing time as a freshman even prompted a call home, where Brown tried to tell her mother that she wanted to transfer.

"I tell this story so many times, to a lot of kids that I coach," Brown said. "I called and said, 'Mom, I'm transferring.' She said, 'Why? What did they do? Are they calling you a name, what?' I told her I wasn't playing. 'That's it? No, you're not transferring. You're going to buckle down, you're going to work and you're going to figure out what you need to do to make them play you.' That always stuck with me throughout my career. Every year, every summer I'm going to make it so where you have to play me. I used it as motivation."

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Williams remembers the type of teammate Brown was, as they both played all four years for the Tar Heels from 1999-2003. Williams appeared in every game as a junior and senior, starting all 34 games during her senior season, while Brown finished her career as a three-time All-ACC selection and a two-time ACC All-Tournament Team honoree.

"Coretta is a true leader," Williams said. "She was thrust into the fire as a sophomore, but she stepped up and ended up as one of the best point guards to play at North Carolina. I tell people a lot that you have to stay ready, so you don't have to get ready. She was prepared to step into that role. The point guard sees everything, and Coretta was not super vocal, but when she's passionate, she will get into your face. And you will listen because you respect her. And she knows how to get others involved."

Coach Hatchell recognized that as well

"We were playing at Maryland one year, in a nip-and-tuck game," Hatchell said. "She came off a screen at the elbow, pulled up, and hit a shot at the buzzer to win the game. She had a lot of confidence, and was just a tremendous skilled athlete. She did that in a crucial game because she knew she could do it. So many times, she was giving the ball up to her teammates when she should have kept it."

Heading into her senior season at North Carolina, Brown felt some of the same outside pressures that she had experienced in high school with her recruiting - except this time, it was the lure of playing basketball at the next level.

"Coming into college, the WNBA wasn't my goal," Brown said. "I actually wanted to be the first female to play in the NBA, and I wanted to be the first female to get signed to a Jumpman (NIKE) deal. But the buzz that was around my senior year, I never focused on that. Early on in college, we had a sports psychologist that we would talk with always after practice. At the time I hated it, but those sessions allowed me to block out the distractions and just have a laser focus on the season. I knew I was going to continue to play, we just didn't know where."

As it happens, Brown was the first ACC player to be taken in the 2003 WNBA Draft, selected with the 11th pick by San Antonio. Was it a big deal when her name was called?

"I got a call from my agent," Brown said. "'You just got drafted, did you see it?' she asked. But I was in my dorm, doing laundry. I had it pulled up on my laptop in my room. She thought I was having a big party! But I was just doing laundry."

"All of her teammates wanted her to go to the WNBA and be that great player, because of how hard she worked," Hatchell said. "She was always about her teammates, and that's what drew them to her."

The impact of Brown's journey to the WNBA had an impact well beyond her immediate family and her North Carolina family. It greatly impacted her home town of Statesboro.

"She's the only one to have played in the WNBA from here," Aubrey said. "We've had a couple play overseas since her, but the impact she had in our community was tremendous. After she went through, there was a wave of kids who came through and ended up signing in college. Statesboro High product Mo Bennett, who went to Georgia Tech, credited Coretta for paving the way around here for her. You could tell high school girls basketball, all of a sudden, was elevated a little bit in the area."

And what was the WNBA experience like for Brown?

"It was an absolute dream, and I loved every minute of it," Brown said. "It starts with the leadership. Tamika Catchings, Kelly Schumacher, Mia Ivey, Bridget Pettis - when you're playing around people like that, who have bubbly personalities as it is, then you have me, a shy rookie coming in. They just welcomed me with open arms. We were very close, which is very rare among pro athletes. That bonding we had in my first and second year with the Fever, I think of how blessed I was just to be a part of it."

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### ***The Coaching Call***

Brown played for four seasons in the WNBA, three with Indiana and one final year with Chicago. She interned with the WNBA at first, then dove into coaching initially in the Atlanta area, serving as a community coach with Benjamin E. Mays HS. Her first collegiate coaching job at Tennessee Tech. For three seasons, she helped the team register 54 wins and collect the Ohio Valley Conference Championship in 2010-11.

She first knew she wanted to get into coaching during college. "I knew I wasn't going to play forever," Brown said. "I first went into college wanting to own a business. But I took one business class in my freshman year and realized - no, I don't."

"I knew I wanted to do something in sports because I love the game. So I looked back at my freshman year, and how my coaches were able to help me grow."

Brown worked at Tennessee Tech under head coach Sytia Messer. When Messer left the program in 2012 to take a position at Georgia Tech, Brown was searching for her next position. What she found was a small school in Thomasville, Georgia, that was looking to start a program.

"I had an interview at Thomas University, and with two other Division I schools," Brown said. "My sister lived in Tallahassee, which was just 45 minutes away from Thomasville. And it was a challenge, starting your own program. The crazy thing is, the whole time I was at Tennessee Tech with Tia [Coach Sytia Messer], she told me 'I'm grooming you to be a head coach.'"

The natural transition of Brown from player to coach did not surprise her former teammate or coach.

"I was not shocked she made that transition," Williams said. "She's a teacher. Point guards are going to be coaches since they know how to coach, they see every position. And her playing experience in the WNBA - when kids see that their coaches played at the level they want to get to, it's impactful."

"There's an old saying, 'It's a giver's game'," Coach Hatchell said. "That's Coretta. She just gives, gives and gives. And she gains from it. She's going to be a great coach."



***Coming Home***



The journey back to Statesboro is almost complete. After four seasons at Thomas University, Brown joined the staff at West Alabama for two seasons before Coach Howard brought her to Georgia Southern and back home.

In her first season with the Eagles, she helped Georgia Southern claim the second-most wins in Sun Belt Conference play since the school joined the league in 2014. But she also was named to the Women Coaches NEXT UP! program, sponsored by the Women's Basketball Coaches Association and the Women Leaders in College Sports organization.

A program designed to promote the advancement and retention of women basketball coaches in intercollegiate athletics, its purpose is to provide a workshop for current assistant coaches to learn from and interact with administrators who are making hiring decisions for their respective women's basketball programs.

And being able to do that - to continue and to grow as a coach - while being just minutes away from her family is one of the most satisfying aspects of being back in Bulloch County for Brown.

"I believe in balance. My family is so important to me," Brown said. "Even on my worst days, my mother will call and say 'I'm going to bring you lunch.' I mean, how does she know I haven't eaten all day?"

"A lot of the family stuff in the last decade, I missed out on in my coaching career by being away and traveling so much. I'm now able to get that feel, and get that joy because I'm so close to the family."

Being back in her hometown goes beyond her family as well. It means a lot to the community that embraced her when she was the standout high school student at Southeast Bulloch, filling the gyms with fans that came to watch her play.

"I was so happy when I heard that she was coming to Georgia Southern," Aubrey said. "Because, if ever there was a great ambassador for Statesboro, with all the things she did to bring attention to her hometown, she's it. For her to come back and be on the staff is huge, not only from the standpoint of getting a great person who really knows the game, but also by bringing people from Bulloch County to the games because they know she is a part of the Georgia Southern family."

"I think Georgia Southern is blessed to have Coretta back in the city," Williams said. "It comes full circle. I remember, as a freshman, how she always talked about Statesboro. Coming from Detroit, I had no idea about the city, but because of her, I know! With her love for the city, the community and the Georgia Southern family, I think it's going to do amazing things for the program. Her and Coach Anita, the dynamic duo of the staff. I'm excited about the future of Georgia Southern Women's Basketball!"

Coming off the heels of an eventful first season of the Howard Era at Georgia Southern, the 2020-21 season is shaping up to be even better. And to bring a full circle back around again, one of the five freshmen who will be suiting up for the Eagles this fall is a Statesboro native - guard Lacy Robins.

"You don't want to miss next season," Brown said. "We've been doing a lot of groundwork with our returners, and our freshman class is going to be one of the top classes in the Sun Belt. I don't know what the season's going to look like, but trust me - you are going to want to see it!"