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SEASON PREVIEW: Youthful Optimism The Narrative For GS Women's Basketball In 2020-21
Coach Anita Howard's second season at the helm of the Eagles to navigate eight newcomers plus COVID-19
Women's Basketball
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The second year of Georgia Southern women's basketball under Head Coach [Anita Howard](#) begins with the same thing that every other collegiate basketball program is experiencing in the year of COVID-19. Uncertainty.

Coach Howard, however, also has plenty of youthful optimism that the 2020-21 season will continue an upward trend as her Eagles take flight in the Sun Belt Conference.

Georgia Southern won five more league games in 2019-20 than it did in the previous season, and qualified for the Sun Belt Conference postseason after a two-year absence. This season, despite being picked 10th out of 12 teams overall and sixth in the East Division, Coach Howard's squad brings an exciting mix of eight newcomers to join with seven returners from last season's team that won the second-most games in Sun Belt play since the school joined the league in 2014-15.

"I hope we're going to be a lot more exciting," Coach Howard said. "With the opportunity to bring in my first true freshman class, we have a much younger team from our veteran roster last year. I thought last year, we did a great job of just figuring out what we could do and how we could be successful. Now, with the players we were able to bring in, we can play the style we want to play. We can see what Georgia Southern women's basketball is going to look like for years to come. We want our players to get out in transition, and have fun."

The Eagles went 7-11 in Sun Belt Conference play in 2019-20, but Georgia Southern had second-half leads in six of those 11 losses. Coach Howard expects her team to show improvement in turning those leads into victories.

"Last year, we struggled with closing games out," Coach Howard said. "This year, I think we will have the ability to close them out because of our competitive drive. The newcomers we've brought in, they're used to winning championships at the high school and AAU levels, so the mindset of 'we should win' is already there."

Position wise, the Eagles may be the deepest at the point guard position, with returners [Jordan Strange](#) (5-7, Jr., Columbia, S.C.) and [Ja'nya Love-Hill](#) (5-6, Soph., Columbus, Ga.) joined by a trio of newcomers, highlighted by Arkansas transfer [ATyanna Gaulden](#) (5-7, Sr., Ocilla, Ga.) and a pair of freshmen, [Daeja Holmes](#) (5-9, Fr., Fresno, Calif.) and local product [Lacy Robins](#) (5-11, Fr., Statesboro, Ga.).

Strange played in 30 games, starting eight, last season while Love-Hill was able to play in 10 games after recovering from an ACL injury suffered in high school. Gaulden dished out 100 assists last season for the Razorbacks and compiled a stellar 2.12 assist/TO ratio. Holmes averaged 21.1 ppg as a senior at Herbert Hoover HS, while Robins was the 5A Region Co-Player of the Year at Statesboro HS.

The shooting guard position sees the return of leading scorer [Tatum Barber](#) (5-10, Sr., Dallas, Texas) and standout freshman [Jaiden Hamilton](#) (5-9, Soph., Augusta, Ga.) in addition to newcomer [Simone James](#) (5-10, Fr., San Diego, Calif.). Gaulden, Holmes and Robins will also all see time at the two as well.

Barber led the Eagles not only in scoring (12.3 ppg) but also in rebounding (5.7 rpg) as a junior and enters her senior season needing just 232 points to reach 1,000 for her career. Hamilton started 21 of 30 games as a true freshman, averaging 7.0 points per game while hitting for a season-high 25 points in the Eagles' 80-67 win over Arkansas State on Feb. 8. James was an All-State honoree at Christian HS in California, scoring more than 1,500 points in her high school career.

The small forward spot will see Barber, Hamilton and James all contributing, along with returnee [Mya Burns](#) (6-0, Soph., North Augusta, S.C.) and incoming freshman [Terren Ward](#) (5-11, Fr., Jesup, Ga.). Burns started 19 of 30 games for the Eagles as a true freshman, averaging 5.3 points and 3.6 rebounds per game, while Ward was the 5A Region Co-Player of the Year at Wayne County HS, setting the school record for most points and rebounds.

At power forward, junior [Tsubasa Nisbet](#) (6-0, Jr., Christchurch, New Zealand) returns and will be joined by a pair of transfers - Fordham transfer [Eden Johnson](#) (6-2, R-Fr., Kissimmee, Fla.) and Florida SouthWestern State transfer [Shondell Vickers](#) (6-2, Soph., Waycross, Ga.). Burns and Ward will also see time at the spot.

Nisbet started 19 of 30 games during her sophomore season, averaging 5.3 points and 3.6 rebounds per game. Johnson redshirted her season at Fordham last year, but was an All-State performer at Skyline HS in Michigan. Vickers, meanwhile, averaged 13.3 ppg and 7.7 rpg as a freshman at Florida SouthWestern State and shot 63.3% from the field.

Finally, at center, the Eagles have gotten quite a bit taller with the influx of both Vickers and Johnson joining returner [Sarah Moore](#) (6-1, Sr., Tampa, Fla.) and incoming freshman [Lydia Freeman](#) (6-5, Fr., Atlanta, Ga.). Moore averaged 2.7 points and 3.4 rebounds per game in 26 games as a junior, and Freeman was a main driving force behind three straight state championships for Westlake HS, earning All-State honors as a senior.

"Last year, we were a little undersized," Coach Howard said. "This year, we're a lot taller in positions, so we have a lot of positionless basketball plays that we're going to look to run, because we have so many players that can play multiple positions. We're having fun changing up how we like to run offense in the halfcourt set. Our transition is our best offense, but with that comes turnovers, so we have to learn how to be poised under pressure."

The 2020-21 season begins with the Eagles visiting Jacksonville State on November 25. Georgia Southern will host a pair of non-conference opponents in Furman on December 3 and Coastal Georgia on December 12, while also competing in the Georgia State Holiday Classic on December 20 & 21 against Chattanooga and Western Carolina, respectively. The conference slate sees the Sun Belt return to divisional formats, where Georgia Southern will only play the other Eastern Division schools - Appalachian State, Coastal Carolina, Georgia State, South Alabama and Troy.

The new conference slate begins for the Eagles on New Year's Day as Georgia Southern travels to Mobile to take on South Alabama for games on the 1st and 2nd of January. The Eagles then open up the home conference slate on Jan. 8 and 9 against Appalachian State.

Georgia Southern travels back to the state of Alabama to face off against Troy on Jan. 15 and 16, returning home to complete the series against South Alabama on Jan. 22 and 23. January concludes for the Eagles on Jan. 29 and 30 at Coastal Carolina.

Troy visits Statesboro to begin February, coming to Hanner on Feb. 5 and 6. The Eagles then will take on in-state rival Georgia State at home on Thursday, Feb. 11. The return trip to Atlanta will take place on Saturday, Feb. 13.

The final two weekends of the regular season see the Eagles host Coastal Carolina on Feb. 19 and 20, then travel to Appalachian State on Feb. 26 and Feb. 27. All 12 league women's basketball teams will advance to the 2021 Sun Belt Conference Championships in Pensacola. The first four seeds will receive byes, and first round action begins on Friday, March 5th at both Pensacola State College and the Bay Center Arena. The quarterfinals will take place on Saturday, March 6th at both venues, with the semifinals on Sunday, March 7th and the final on Monday, March 8th, taking place at the Bay Center Arena.

"It's been pretty challenging," Coach Howard said about preparing to start the season, not knowing who they'd be going up against until the last minute. "As with any coaching staff right now with the pandemic. But I always feel like we have to prepare for us. We have to make sure what we're doing is air tight. With a young team, our focus is on the fundamentals of what we want to do.

"No matter who we were going to be playing, we knew we wanted to get better at three things this year. Not turning the ball over, crashing the glass, and what I call free throw defense - keeping teams off the line by not fouling them, and knocking down our free throws when fouled."

As to a goal for the season, Coach Howard's vision for what will make the 2020-21 season successful is a simple one - respect.

"I want people to respect Georgia Southern women's basketball," Coach Howard said. "People fear playing our football team. People fear playing our baseball team, and our men's basketball program. I want them to respect playing us. I want us to be a team that others don't want to see, because they know it's going to be a dogfight."

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