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SEASON PREVIEW: GS Women's Basketball Looks To Take Flight Under Coach Anita Howard
Women's Basketball
Posted: 11/8/2019 3:00:00 PM

STATESBORO - Georgia Southern women's basketball embarks on a new era for the 2019-20 season, as [Anita Howard](#) takes the reins of the Eagles as the eighth head coach in program history. The team opens the regular season on Sunday at Furman.

Key for Coach Howard is that all five starters return from last season's squad, and 10 players overall. That kind of experience will be a plus as the Eagles try to make strides in the competitive Sun Belt Conference.

Add to that five newcomers and Coach Howard believes the building process begins with a very important first step for the Eagles in 2019-20. And that first step begins with the trademark of Coach Howard's playing and coaching career - defense. Getting Georgia Southern to buy into her defensive philosophy was one of the biggest challenges of her first few months at the helm of the program.

"I believe defense wins games," Howard said. "Getting our players to understand what I mean about pressuring the ball, but keeping your space, was challenging. Sometime we over-pressure and we get beat, or we over pressure and we foul. We've got to pressure the ball and contain it, keep it in front of us. Everything right now is basic, but we've got to get good at the fundamental part of our base defense. Our defense is looking better than our offense now because we've been putting a lot of time into it. But getting them back in April, until now, I think they've done a really good job with it. We definitely want to swarm the ball. It takes some trusting in themselves."

The Eagles made strides last season offensively, increasing their offensive points per game by 10% over the previous season (62.2 ppg from 56.8 ppg) and shooting 50 percentage points better (.382 from .332). Coach Howard feels that if the defense can make similar strides this season, the success will come.

Position-wise, the key to any team starts at the point guard position, and the Eagles are very deep at the one. [Amira Atwater](#) (5-6, Sr., Douglasville, Ga.) led the Sun Belt in assists per game (5.5 apg) and heads into her senior season needing just 77 assists to break the school record in that category. Sophomore [Jordan Strang](#) (5-7, Soph., Columbia, S.C.) emerged as one of the top young defensive players in the league as a freshman, and incoming freshmen [Jaiden Hamilton](#) (5-9, Fr., Augusta, Ga.) and [Ja'nyia Love-Hill](#) (5-6, Fr., Columbus, Ga.) are both expected to see time at the point. Coach Howard also expects senior [Alexis Brown](#) (5-6, Sr., Madison, Ga.) to play minutes at the point as well.

"Amira is more of our true point guard, as she looks to distribute the ball first," Howard said. "But we need her to be a scoring threat as well, because I want that position to be a threat so other teams can't play off of them. Right now, that position is fairly quiet. I would like for our point guards to be more vocal, to be more demanding on when we need to pick it up or slow it down."

The shooting guard position is headlined by Brown, who averaged a career-high 17.4 points per game in earning second-team All-Sun Belt Conference honors a year ago. She has been named to the preseason All-Sun Belt team for 2019-20, and she needs just 67 points to become the 24th Georgia Southern women's basketball player to reach 1,000 career points. Junior [Tatum Barber](#) (5-10, Jr., Dallas, Texas) will also see time at the two, along with senior [Nakol Franks](#) (5-7, Sr., Greenville, S.C.) and Hamilton.

"The job of our twos is to produce buckets for us, but you can do that in different ways," Howard said. "We have our shooting twos, who can stretch the defense, but you also have to have a counter and attack."

At the small forward, or three, is where Barber shined in her breakout sophomore campaign a season ago, averaging 11.8 points per game while also grabbing 5.1 rebounds per game, the second-most on the squad. Freshman [Mya Burns](#) (6-0, Fr., North Augusta, S.C.) and senior [Victoria Stavropoulos](#) (6-0, Sr., Orland Park, Ill.) will also contribute at the position this season, with Franks adding some minutes at the spot also.

"My three has to be able to rebound," Howard said. "And also has to be the slasher. Usually it's a stronger guard, who can get us rebounds and second-chance opportunities. It's a do-it-all position that requires a lot - shoot, slash, rebound. I'm looking for a glue kid who can get it done."

The four spot will see senior [Hailey Dias-Allen](#) (6-2, Sr., Greensboro, N.C.) as well as graduate transfer [Nikki McDonald](#) (6-0, Grad., Atlanta, Ga.) look to make an impact for the Eagles both offensively and defensively. Sophomore New Zealander [Tsubasa Nisbet](#) (6-0, Soph., Christchurch, New Zealand), along with Stavropoulos, will contribute at the spot as well.

"The four position is a stretch for us," Howard said. "We want someone who can knock down a 3-pointer, and they definitely have to rebound. We want a more agile player who can guard on the perimeter, but also be big and long for us in the paint. They don't necessarily have to play with their back to the basket, but they need to have some of those moves. But the biggest key is to stretch the defense so we can clear it out for our five, or for guards to drive through there."

Finally, the center or the five spot will see junior [Sarah Moore](#) (6-1, Jr., Tampa, Fla.) and redshirt junior transfer La'tia Fils-Aime' (6-1, F, Daleville, Ala.) each trying to cement that spot on the court, while Dias-Allen will see minutes there as she has each of the last three seasons.

"The five is our anchor," Howard said. "They've got to protect the house, be the muscle. I don't care if the five scores or not, but they've got to get stops and they've got to get us second-chance opportunities."

The regular season begins on Nov. 10, as the Eagles travel to WNIT participant Furman. The Eagles will then have a pair of games at home, taking on Kennesaw State (Nov. 17) and North Dakota (Nov. 20) at Hanner.

Afterwards, the Eagles wrap up November with a pair of road trips to WNIT participant Bethune-Cookman (Nov. 23) and Winthrop (Nov. 26) during Thanksgiving week.

December begins for Georgia Southern at Wofford (Dec. 1), then a quick trip up I-16 to NCAA participant Mercer (Dec. 7) precedes a western jaunt where the Eagles will travel to Ole Miss (Nov. 16), then fly to Las Vegas to participate in the 2019 Holiday Hoops Classic. Georgia Southern will take on WNIT participant Kent State (Dec. 19) and St. Francis Brooklyn (Dec. 20) in the tourney, to be held at the South Point Hotel and Casino. The non-conference slate for the Eagles wraps up with a trip to New Orleans to take on Tulane on December 30.

That non-conference schedule for the Eagles sees only two of the 11 games at home in Hanner, which means a lot of time spent together on the road. But one of Coach Howard's goal for the non-conference season is to see the Eagles grow into a squad that is more comfortable with one another.

"We've got to understand who's on the court, and who brings what to the court," Coach Howard said. "If I'm on the court with a Jaiden or a Jordan, and they're pressuring the ball, then I know I can get an easy steal. Or if I'm on the court with Nakol or Alexis, I know that I've got shooters on my left and right, so when I'm attacking, if the defense collapses, I can kick it out to them. Right now, everything is new to us. We've got to understand there's a sense of purpose in everything we do. The offense that we put in allows our players to play. And I hope that, as we move deeper into the season, we recognize each other's strengths and play to those strengths. Because once you do that, you start to have fun. And if we're able to do that and have fun, it's going to be hard for people to stop us."

The Sun Belt Conference slate begins at Hanner for Georgia Southern by hosting ULM (Jan. 2) and Louisiana (Jan. 4). The first Sun Belt road trip takes the Eagles to NCAA participant Little Rock (Jan. 9) and Arkansas State (Jan. 11), followed by a three-game home swing at Hanner with GS hosting WNIT participants Troy (Jan. 16) and South Alabama (Jan. 18), plus their Southern vs. State Rivalry Series matchup with Georgia State (Jan. 25).

A trip to Coastal Carolina (Jan. 30) finishes the month of January, and the Eagles will open up February at Appalachian State (Feb. 1). Georgia Southern will host Little Rock (Feb. 6) and Arkansas State (Feb. 8) at Hanner, before traveling to Louisiana to take on ULM (Feb. 13) and Louisiana (Feb. 15). The final home week for the Eagles at Hanner has GS hosting Coastal Carolina (Feb. 20) and Appalachian State (Feb. 22) before wrapping up the regular season with three road games, at Texas State (Feb. 27), WNIT participant UT Arlington (Feb. 29) and Georgia State (March 7).

The 2020 Sun Belt Conference Championships will begin on Tuesday, March 11, with on-campus games leading into the bracketed quarterfinals, which take place in New Orleans on March 14-16.

Coach Howard is confident that at the end of the season, her first campaign will be a success. What will that look like?

"Playing together, and believing we can win," Howard said. "If we lose a game, kicking and screaming and fighting and clawing, then I'm ok with that. But if we lose a game and we give up, I'm not going to be happy with that. I want us to set the culture now. The culture is - blood sweat and cheers. We're going to start it from tip to the buzzer. So that next year, when we go into it, the expectation is that culture-wise we're exactly where we need to be. As long as we learn to play together, and fight to the end, you won't outwork us. I don't want us to be outworked by anybody. And I don't think we will."

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