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AJ Henderson - Georgia Southern Athletics

Volleyball Season Preview: Eagles Will Rely on Depth to Flip the Script in 2021

Georgia Southern opens the campaign Friday in Hanner Fieldhouse.

By Marc Gignac
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STATESBORO – Eagle volleyball fans have seen many highlights in the first two seasons under head coach Chad Willis.

Georgia Southern finished the fall of 2020 by winning three of its last four matches, including the first Sun Belt Tournament victory since the Eagles joined the conference in 2014. The Eagles have been competitive in almost every match, and the improvement is evident to those who follow the program closely.

That improvement has not manifested itself into wins and losses yet, but there is a palpable feeling around the program that the Eagles know they are close – really close. In the last two campaigns, Georgia Southern is 2-6 in five-set matches and in matches it lost, dropped 22 sets by three points or less. Making the plays to turn those results around will be the key for the program to turn the corner.

"You address those issues with talent, and we feel really good about the talent we have on this roster, top to bottom," said Willis. "Then, I think you look at the depth as well, and we've talked a lot about role clarity and really leaning into our depth. We think the competitive energy across the board and the depth we have will allow us to turn a corner. We'll find ourselves in some tight sets and some tight matches, but we feel pretty confident about our depth and our competitive energy that we should be coming out on the other side of those this year."

Serve/receive has been a point of emphasis since Willis set foot on campus, and the Eagles made significant improvement in passing from year one to year two. The coaching staff expects that to continue and believes the most significant improvement in serve/receive this season will come from the service line.

"I think we have the ability to be a much better attacking team from the service line," said Willis. "It won't necessarily manifest itself in aces but more tactically in what we're able to do. One of our goals for our serving group is to have a plus two mentality back there where every time we sideout, you go back to the service line and you have a responsibility to earn us two points on your serve. If we do that, we feel like we can manufacture some of those three-point runs that are going to put us in good situations to pull out some sets."



All 12 teams will advance to the Sun Belt Championship again this season, and the tournament will be Nov. 18-21, at the Foley Sports Complex in Foley, Alabama. The format has changed this year as the league will go from pool play back to a single-elimination bracket. Gaining the experience of playing in the tournament, winning their first Sun Belt Tournament match and pushing UTA to the limit in their second contest have given the Eagles confidence and fanned the competitive flame throughout the offseason.

“There was a sense of relief in getting that first Sun Belt Tournament win but also coming back to campus, there was a little bit of an unfinished-business mentality, where we weren't just going to hang our hat on that win,” said Willis. “I think our returners used that as motivation this spring and summer, and we're in a place where now we feel confident that we can make a run.”

The Eagles were picked third in the East Division in the Sun Belt Preseason Coaches Poll, and the top two seeds in each Division will earn a bye in the Sun Belt Tournament. Twenty-six matches are on the regular-season schedule, including 17 contests in the friendly confines of Hanner Fieldhouse.

The Eagles are focused on playing their best volleyball in November, and as he has during his tenure, Willis plans to utilize his entire roster throughout the season. With the added depth on the roster, the coaching staff has spent the last week of the preseason talking about roles. The mantra is that though you might not be in the starting lineup, you have the responsibility to be ready to execute when called upon.

“As part of role clarity, there's the old saying, ‘Do your job,’ and we have taken a lot of time to go position by position and talk about what some of our priorities are in terms of systematically, what are we trying to do and your job is to execute that to the best of your ability,” said Willis. “It's a marathon, and it's important for us to get a lot of different people some opportunities and some court time. Ultimately, we're preparing for three or four really good days of volleyball down in Foley in the middle of November and to do that, we're really going to have to lean into that depth.”



Madsion Brown enters the season with 2,389 career assists, good for seventh all-time at Georgia Southern.

Setters

#16 Grace Slader
#18 Madison Brown

Notes

- Madison Brown ranks seventh in career assists at Georgia Southern with 2,389.
- Brown was named the Sun Belt Setter of the Week twice last season.
- Grace Slader transferred from West Virginia mid-year last season and played in all three matches in the spring.
- Slader posted 38 assists and 17 digs in the Blue-White scrimmage.

Willis Quote

"The position group has done a good job of settling into what we want our offensive identity to be. We have a lot of versatility, a lot more depth in hitters, but the game plan has really stayed true to what we've tried to implement since we got here. We're going to play through our middles, try to get them as many balls as we can, especially in transition, with the hope that that will open things up for our pins. Ideally if we're passing well, we should be moving hitters around quite a bit and trying to exploit and attack matchups. Madison and Grace have done a really great job of settling into that system. Both of them are in a really good place physically and mentally."



Rebekah Farthing ranked eighth in the Sun Belt in digs (4.34/set).

Defensive Specialists/Liberos

#2 Meredith Eckard
#3 Abby Strong
#6 Rebekah Farthing
#8 Ainsley Clifford
#12 Paige Collins

#17 Ashlyn Lovett

#22 Logan Jones

Notes

- The Eagles have four returning letterwinners in the group in Ainsley Clifford, Meredith Eckard, Rebekah Farthing and Abby Strong.
- Farthing ranked eighth in the Sun Belt Conference in digs (4.34/set).
- Strong collected 10 digs in the Blue-White scrimmage. Freshman Logan Jones posted 22 digs, while classmate Paige Collins added 13.

Willis Quote

"We're seven deep, and all seven of those can play and play at a high level. One of the highlights for me so far this preseason has been our intensity on the defensive side of the ball. We've got a Bro Group (back row) that is digging in and making it really difficult for hitters to score, and if that carries over, it's going to elevate our level of play offensively because those hitters have to learn to find different ways to score points. It also will speak volumes to what our identity is going to be as a team, and a big part of that identity is that we're going to make it really difficult for opposing teams to score points."



Mya Wilson was named Preseason All-Sun Belt.

Middles

#7 Mya Wilson

#11 Megan Vickery

#13 Baylor Bumford

#23 Christina Walton

Notes

- Mya Wilson was named second-team All-Sun Belt last season and Preseason All-Sun Belt in the league's Coaches Poll.
- Baylor Bumford was one of three Eagles to play in all 62 sets last season. She owns the school record for blocks in a four-set match with 15.
- Walton and Bumford each had seven blocks in the Blue-White Scrimmage, while freshman Megan Vickery notched 11.

Willis Quote

"I think that group has a good balance of offensive and defensive focus. Christina and Megan have shown consistently in the preseason that they are going to be a pretty physical presence at the net in terms of blocking. On the flip side, you take Baylor and Mya, and they are going to be more of our offensive output. We have some flexibility there to move some pieces around depending on what we need."



Chamblee Russell earned Sun Belt Rookie of the Week honors twice last season.

Outside Hitters

#1 Hannah McGlockton

#4 Jillian Gray

#5 Jordan Christy

#9 Chamblee Russell

#10 Maddie Bryant

#15 Robin Rosser

#21 Paige Powers

Notes

- Georgia Southern returns three letterwinners in this position group in Maddie Bryant, Hannah McGlockton and Chamblee Russell.
- Russell was a two-time Sun Belt Rookie of the Week last season.
- Bryant has 530 career kills, 465 digs and 122 blocks in 72 matches.
- McGlockton had 13 kills and five digs in the Blue-White scrimmage. Freshman Paige Powers posted 17 kills and six digs, while classmates Robin Rosser and Jordan Christy each posted nine kills.

Willis Quote

"From a numbers standpoint, it's our deepest group and a group that has shown on any given day, any of them can find themselves on the court and do some really good things for us. We have a great balance of scoring pins along with some six rotation, pass a 2.0 dig two balls a set and hit about .200 pins. Just trying to get some options out there to see where we can manufacture the most points. I would expect there to be some moving pieces throughout the year as we go just trying to get some options out there to see where we can manufacture the most points. We know offensively we're going to have to average 17 or 18 earned points a set, and hopefully, we can get a large chunk of those from kills."