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SEASON PREVIEW: Youthful Eagles Head Into 2018-19 WBB Season With Plenty Of Optimism
Georgia Southern features one of the youngest rosters in the nation, but have the hunger to climb the Sun Belt standings
Women's Basketball
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STATESBORO, Ga. - The 2018-19 edition of the Georgia Southern women's basketball team will be a rarity for head coach [Kip Drown](#) and his staff. The Eagles have no seniors, or even redshirt juniors, on the roster - meaning every player who suits up for GS has no more than two years of collegiate experience heading into the season.

But for coach Drown, he views that more of an opportunity than a hindrance as the Eagles look to put aside last season and focus on climbing the ladder of the Sun Belt Conference standings.

"When I look back at last year, it was the worst winning percentage I've ever had in 40 years of coaching," Coach Drown said. "But from a pure coaching standpoint - your job as a coach is to make them better. I felt good about the advancements, seeing these kids get better down the stretch. I felt good about the progress we made."

That's backed up by the numbers, as the Eagles were plenty competitive down the stretch in Sun Belt Conference play, culminating in one of the most thrilling league tournament games in recent memory, a triple-overtime contest against Louisiana in the first round of the conference tournament in New Orleans in March.

This season, the Eagles have a core group that return from last season's squad, and without a senior group that coaches like to rely on to provide leadership, Coach Drown is first looking to his group of five juniors, as well as the rest of his roster, to step up.

"We've been together now for three years," Drown said about his juniors. "I think they are comfortable with our program, and I'm comfortable with them. They know what's expected. But at the same time, one of the things we've been preaching is that everybody's a leader in some regards. That's a big thing in our athletic department. We're trying to make everyone accountable - you may not have been elected as a captain, but you still have leadership responsibilities. I think as a group being as young as we are, that opens it up to a lot more people. You don't have that separation that you get sometimes with seniors and underclassmen."

The junior class for the Eagles features four players who averaged 23 minutes per game or more last season - starting at the point guard position with [Amira Atwater](#). Atwater broke out last season to rank among the Sun Belt Conference leaders in assists and assist/turnover ratio, delivering 4.3 assists per game while also chipping in 4.5 points per game.

Trying to shoulder the scoring load for the Eagles this upcoming season will be junior sharpshooters [Alexis Brown](#) and [Nakol Franks](#). Statistically, the duo had similar seasons with Brown averaging 9.0 points per game in 26 contests, and Franks averaging 8.9 points per game in 30 games. The duo combined to knock down 85 three-pointers and also took advantage at the free throw line when opportunities presented itself, shooting a stellar 83% (100-121) from the charity stripe.

Junior [Hailey Dias-Allen](#) emerged as the Eagles' starting post player in the back half of the 2017-18 season and will look to really grab ahold of a starting post spot this season after showing great strides in her offensive and defensive game last year.

The fifth senior, [Victoria Stavropoulos](#), has been one of the Eagles' most improved offensive players in the offseason and will try to carve out a role early on in 2018-19.

The Eagles' two sophomores each got valuable experience in 2017-18 - guard/forward [Tatum Barber](#) flashed a developed offensive game as well as a penchant for crashing the boards, while center [Sarah Moore](#) put together fine efforts against SBC champion Little Rock (seven rebounds) and Arkansas State (five offensive rebounds). The other returnee for the Eagles is redshirt freshman center [Alisha Owens](#).

Four newcomers join the Eagles for the upcoming season - point guard [Jordan Strange](#), shooting guard [Lola Lovitt](#), forward [Tsubasa Nisbet](#) and center [Ella Felkins](#).

A highly-decorated player out of South Carolina, Strange will be the primary backup to Atwater at the point guard position this season. North Carolinian Lovitt will be in the mix at the shooting guard position behind [Alexis Brown](#), while Nisbet brings plenty of international experience from her time with the New Zealand U-17 National Team to Statesboro. Felkins is a defensive stalwart in the middle who hails from Texas and could be in the mix for minutes at center early on this season.

Coach Drown highlighted a couple of areas that he thinks the team will have to improve on in order to have success in 2018-19.

"I think our two biggest priorities are rebounding the basketball better and improving our defense," Drown said. "Last year we were up to third at one point in the Sun Belt in turnovers created, which is the highest we've ever been. We want to keep that going. This year, we're more athletic than we were at that time. I think we're going to be a much better offensive team. We have more kids that can shoot the basketball and are comfortable in the system."

The schedule for the Eagles in 2018-19 is an attractive one, featuring 14 home games at Hanner Fieldhouse and nine overall games against teams that advanced to the postseason last year.

"I think it's a very good schedule," Drown said. "There are some real challenging teams in the non-conference part of the slate, but I think it's very competitive for us. And the Sun Belt Conference is going to be really interesting this year."

Following the season-opener, Georgia Southern travels to Virginia Tech (Nov. 10), then returns home to face NCAA participant and in-state rival Mercer (Nov. 12). A short trip to Savannah to face Savannah State (Nov. 15) is followed by a Thanksgiving trip to New York to play Stony Brook (Nov. 20). The Eagles finish off the month with a home game against Bethune-Cookman (Nov. 25) and another in-state trip to the north side of Atlanta to take on Kennesaw State (Nov. 28).

"We're excited to get to open our season at home with Wofford. And then we have two Power Five games on the schedule, the first of which is after we open with Wofford, we go to Virginia Tech, who was the runner-up in the Women's NIT last year. They had a really good year."

Georgia Southern breaks for final exams before returning to the court on Dec. 12 at Presbyterian. The Eagles' annual Kids Day game on Dec. 14 will see Georgia Southern host Coastal Georgia at 11 a.m., then the final home game of 2018 features Winthrop (Nov. 18). The calendar year and non-conference slate wraps up for Georgia Southern on Dec. 21 as the Eagles visit the University of Georgia in Athens, seeking their first win over the Bulldogs since 1981.

The Sun Belt schedule begins on Jan. 3 against Texas State at Hanner Fieldhouse. Georgia Southern will have five of eight February games at home, setting up for a push to the postseason.

The Eagles were picked to finish tied for 10th in a preseason poll of the league's coaches, tied with Georgia State and ahead of UL Monroe. Little Rock, the defending league champion, was picked to repeat as Sun Belt champions in 2018-19. The Sun Belt tournament format changed for this season - the Eagles will have to finish among the Top 10 teams to earn a berth, and the first-round games featuring the 7-10 seeds will be on campus games on March 11. Eight teams will advance to Lakefront Arena in New Orleans on March 13-16 to wrap up the 2018-19 Sun Belt Tournament.

The challenges are there for the Eagles but Coach Drown is excited about the opportunity presented to his team this season.

"There's a legitimate hunger with this group," Drown said. "They really want to win, and they really want to see the program go to another level. They've worked hard in the weight room, and worked all summer with conditioning. I think there's a passion, and that commitment is where it starts."

"If we can stay healthy, and we can keep getting better, there's a passion and a real burning desire to be successful this year."

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