10-28-2021

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Georgia Southern University

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Volleyball Feature: Bench energy playing a big role in Eagles’ success

Georgia Southern’s 13 wins this season are already the most since 2016.

By Marc Gignac

10/28/2021 7:26:00 PM

STATESBORO – Watching the Georgia Southern bench at an Eagle volleyball match is almost as entertaining as watching the match itself.

Hardly anybody on the Eagle bench sits down, and coordinated routines for certain situations are commonplace. There’s Mjollnir, the Hammer of Thor, after a kill, a cheerleading routine and as you might expect, the obligatory limbo contest during a challenge. A baseball game breaks out from time to time, and a broom seems to find its way onto the court after a sweep.

With 20 healthy student-athletes on the roster to start the season, head coach Chad Willis knew he and his staff would have to define roles, and being a high-energy, positive influence when on the bench is certainly an important one. He also knew that he was going to play a lot of different players in a lot of different situations, and that the players on the bench needed to be locked-in and ready when their number was called.

“As part of role clarity, there's the old saying, ‘Do your job,’ and we took a lot of time in the preseason to go position by position and talk about what some of our priorities are, what are we trying to do and your
job is to execute that to the best of your ability when you get your opportunity to be on the court,” says Willis.

Knowing he would have 14 on the bench at any given time, Willis even applied for and received a waiver from the NCAA so that the bench could wrap around to the baseline. A copy of the approved waiver sits at the scorer’s table in case the match officials try to corral the bench from the baseline. After expectations for the bench were set by the coaching staff, the Eagle players took ownership.

"We sat down at the beginning of the season with Chad and the coaches, and we wanted everyone to be involved in every point in the match so we decided that we were going to have a bunch of cheers so the bench was engaged,” says junior defensive specialist Meredith Eckard.

The coaching staff reinforces the positive energy the bench brings by posting pictures of the bench celebrations every Monday at practice.

“It’s our way of illustrating the importance of these roles and the value they have in impacting matches and our team’s energy,” says Willis.

Haley Fuller, a senior outside hitter who was medically disqualified before the season began, wields Mjollnir (pronounced Myol-neer). When the Eagles put down a big kill, she jumps off the bench, faces the team and pounds Mjollnir on the court with two hands. The other Eagles jump up when Mjollnir hits the floor to, as Fuller puts it, “make it look like we’re sending shockwaves through the ground.”
“I guess it’s my role on the team this year being medically DQ’d, but I think everybody does a good job stepping into the role of cheering on their teammates,” Fuller says.

Everybody has their favorites, and along with Mjollnir, Fuller likes the baseball routine.

“Whenever a team hits out of bounds, we hit like we’re hitting a baseball and then watch it soar into the outfield,” says Fuller.

Eckard prefers a good limbo during long stoppages during challenges.

“My favorite routine is the limbo where two people hold me up, and everybody goes under my legs during the challenge,” she says.

Freshman defensive specialist Paige Collins has an affinity for cheerleading.

“My favorite are the cheer stunts, especially when we lift up Chrissy (senior middle Christina Walton) because you know Chrissy may not be your typical cheerleader,” she says. “It’s one of my favorites because it gets the crowd engaged and the actual cheerleaders are next to us, and they’re just kind of like, ‘What the heck is going on?’”

No matter what the score of the match or set is, the energy permeates from the bench and is contagious for the six players on the court. After posting a 2-6 record in five-set matches and losing 22 sets by three points or less in the last two seasons, the Eagles are 3-1 in five-setters this year and have won 12 sets decided by three points or less.

“I think one of the main things is just to stay positive if things aren’t going our way,” says Collins. “Obviously, the people on the court are working so hard to get us back in the game, and one thing we can do on the bench is stay excited and have fun and be loud because that can radiate onto the six players on the court.”

Georgia Southern has four home matches left and six overall before the Sun Belt Conference Tournament in Foley, Alabama, Nov. 18-21. The Eagles take on Texas State Friday at 6 p.m. and UTA Sunday at noon. Friday’s match is Neon Night with a free glowstick giveaway and Sunday is Volloween with free admission for all fans wearing a costume.