MBB Season Preview: Full Offseason Set to Pay Dividends for Eagles

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Prince Toyambi is one of nine returning lettermen.

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Georgia Southern hosts Ball State in the season opener Nov. 9.

By Marc Gignac

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STATESBORO — Year one was a whirlwind for Georgia Southern men’s basketball coach Brian Burg, his staff and the student-athletes on his team.

Hired in early April, at the beginning of the COVID-19 Pandemic, Burg’s To-Do List following the press conference wound up looking something like this:

- Move halfway across the country.
- Hire a staff.
- Fill nine roster spots, which was tied for the fourth-most in the country, without the ability to travel or bring recruits on campus.
- Put together a schedule.
- Rip up said schedule and put together another one.
- Coach basketball while maintaining flexibility in regard to when practices might be, who the opponent might be, when the game may be played and which Eagles might be available to play in it. For example, the Eagles added a game 72 hours before tip-off vs USC Upstate.
With nine returning letterwinners and a sense of normalcy when it comes to offseason workouts, team practices, the start of the season, a schedule and a weekly routine, the beginning of year two has looked a lot different. The culture, philosophies and expectations have been established and are continuing to blossom, and being able to participate in a normal offseason will pay dividends on the court in 2021-22.

“Returning nine guys is one of the greatest advantages we have,” says Burg. “Last year, we met guys we signed for the first time in-person when they got to campus. Being able to go through an entire spring, a summer, a preseason and now training camp, you have more continuity. You have guys who understand your philosophies on both sides of the basketball, and they are also helping the newcomers. It’s allowed us to have a true foundation.”

There were plenty of positives in the 2020-21 campaign. The Eagles ranked fourth in the Sun Belt in scoring defense, first in turnovers forced and third in steals. Georgia Southern’s 67.8 points per game allowed tied for the 10th best in school history. Building on that defensive identity and establishing a better offensive rhythm has helped Georgia Southern improve in the offseason.

“It’s a huge difference,” adds senior guard Gedi Juozapaitis. “Last year, when we all came in, COVID kind of restricted the time we were allowed to work out. This year, we’ve been playing a lot together over the summer, building that team chemistry, and the difference is going to be significant.”

Gedi Juozapaitis tied for the team lead in 3-pointers made last season with 30.

Burg and the coaching staff have seen all nine returners improve individually throughout the summer, which is helping the team improve as a group. Five newcomers joined the roster, and four were able to go through the summer workouts with the team. Burg can tick down the roster and expound on the development of each guy.
“I have seen guys make huge jumps,” says Burg. “I’ve seen guys who are familiar with our program, and I see a much more mature group of guys. The overall mindset with the mental approach and effort on a daily basis - these guys have one common goal and want to get better.”

Georgia Southern returns 65 percent of its scoring and 79 percent of its rebounding and four players who averaged seven or more points a game from a season ago, but those numbers have not impressed the preseason prognosticators. The Eagles were picked 11th of 12 in the Sun Belt Conference Preseason Coaches Poll with no representatives on the Preseason All-Sun Belt team. It adds more fuel to fan the flames of motivation for the Eagles.

“We’re ready to make a jump,” says Burg. “Guys are invested, and guys are playing team basketball - sharing the basketball. They have one common goal - they want to win and win at a high level. We’re focused on the process because this is when you set your foundation to win in January and February. There's a cohesiveness about this group, and they show up to work every day.”

Georgia Southern opens the season Nov. 9 in a 7 p.m. contest against Ball State in Hanner Fieldhouse. Season tickets are priced as low as $100 and currently on sale along with the Fast Break Flex Plan, which allows fans the ability to choose up to 10 games to attend as well as the number of tickets they need for each game.

Tickets for The Backcourt, a new premium area to enhance game days, which will be located in the space where the Sixth Man Club has been previously hosted (Sixth Man Club will not exist), are also on sale.