MBB Season Preview: Eagles Look to Expand Defensive Identity

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

By Marc Gignac
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STATESBORO – The mantra has been drilled into the Eagles by Georgia Southern head coach Brian Burg and his coaching staff.

Defense travels. Defense wins games in March. Defense gives you the ability to win at a high level.

The proof is in the pudding for Burg who had a courtside seat on the bench when Texas Tech advanced to the 2019 national title game. The Red Raiders gave up 60.7 points a game in that NCAA Tournament run and allowed 59.5 a contest for the season. Little Rock allowed 60.7 points a game when the Trojans went 30-5 and 17-3 in the Sun Belt with Burg on the coaching staff in 2015-16.
“Having been at multiple schools that made it to the NCAA Tournament, the one common denominator is that those teams defend,” says Burg. “When you watch March games, it’s not about running up and down and scoring 90 points. The scores in March are usually in the 65 to 68 range, and you’re going to value every single possession. You have to be able to defend and defend at a high level.”

Defending at a high level is not only good for team success but also great for developing the individual player. Being able to score is all good and well, but scoring alone will not get you to the NBA or the best leagues in Europe.

“Teams in the NBA or the EuroLeague - they are looking for a skill set that you are elite at, whether it be defense, rebounding or running a team,” says Burg. “They aren’t looking if you can get 18 or 20 a night because in many cases, that wouldn’t be your role at your next stop. They are looking for a specific role and skill set that you are elite at.”

The Eagles made significant strides defensively last season and 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 remains a key for Georgia Southern in 2021-22 and that entails staying true to the team’s defensive principles and being more judicious about when to take a risk.

“Being aggressive doesn’t mean you go gambling for steals,” says Burg. “Last year, we were able to force steals and turnovers, but we gave up a lot of easy baskets right at the rim. A more solid five defenders as a team allows you to be successful. It's not always about getting steals and forcing turnovers; it's about forcing contested shots and limiting your opponent to one shot. We want to be solid and make things hard for the offense and force teams into doing things that they aren't used to doing.”

Grant Weatherford grapples for a loose ball against Appalachian State.
One of the drills the Eagles do in practice involves playing 5 on 5 with a plastic bubble over the baskets. It is not a favorite of senior guard Elijah McCadden, but he knows it is making him and his team better.

“They put bubbles on both rims so you’re playing 5 on 5 live but nobody can score so you’re just playing defense,” he says. “We were a good defensive team last year, but we were building a foundation. I’ll think we’ll have better chemistry – really on both ends of the floor – this season, and I think defense will be one of our biggest strengths.”

A defensive possession does not end without a rebound, and limiting their opponent to one shot has also been a point of emphasis for the Eagles. Box out, finish each possession with a rebound and get out in transition. Whether off a missed shot or a turnover, the Eagles will run hard and look for opportunities for easy baskets.

“We have a team that can get out in transition and run, and we’re preaching that all preseason,” says Burg. “We want to get out and run and try to get the easy basket, and then if we don’t have the right shot, we want work the ball - a grind-out mentality if you don’t have a shot in transition. This is the type of basketball that allows you to win on the road and allows you to play deep into March. We want to speed teams up and be the best defensive team in the Sun Belt and then on the offensive side, we want to be a team that works to get the great shot.”

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.