11-10-2021

SEASON PREVIEW: Eagles Poised To Make A Leap In Third Season Of Howard Era

Georgia Southern University
Georgia Southern University Athletics

SEASON PREVIEW: Eagles Poised To Make A Leap In Third Season Of Howard Era
Georgia Southern has increased its win total, on-court performance in first two seasons but Coach Howard feels this season she has the tools to go farther
The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result," Coach Howard says. "But we want to be insane about fundamentals. It's consistent behavior. We want it to become muscle memory. We want to continue to get better at the things we can do and accomplish. It's controlling the controllables. Doing things that do not take talent but effort, like diving on the floor for loose balls and taking charges."

Tempo is a buzzword surrounding athletics right now, not just basketball. But the Eagles are absolutely committed to playing with a tempo that Coach Howard believes will lead to wins.

"We need our point guard to be the brain," Coach Howard said. "Someone who looks to push the tempo and keep the transition defense on their toes. I like a scoring point guard. You've got to be able to knock down the open shot, but also finish on the inside. And we want our point to be our most intense defender, to put as much pressure on the ball as possible."

At the two-guard spot, the Eagles have plenty of options, and in Coach Howard's positionless offense, many times you'll see multiple point guards on the floor filling the two-guard slot. Returners Daeja Holmes (5-9, Soph., Fresno, Calif.), Meya Burns (6-0, Jr., North Augusta, S.C.), Simone James (5-10, Soph., San Diego, Calif.) and pre-season All-Sun Belt Conference honoree Terren Ward (5-11, Soph., G/F) will be key for Georgia Southern to generate offense, but all three will also slide over to the three at times during the season. Newcomers Taya Gibson (5-11, Jr., Rome, Ga.), Hannah Fuller (5-9, Fr., Greenville, S.C.) and Kharrington Collier (5-8, Fr., Marietta, Ga.) will mix in these spots.

"Our twos, you have to be able to get a bucket," Coach Howard said. "Everyone on our team has the green light, but the two guard, those are the people who can stretch the defense. And with our positionless basketball, if you know the two, you know the three. Our threes have to be a little bit grittier, get in and rebound."

The post positions were a huge part of the Eagles' success last season, helping Georgia Southern put up some of the best rebounding numbers in the nation and in program history. Returners Eden Johnson (6-2, R-Soph., Kissimmee, Fla.) and Jazzyah Nisbet (6-0, Sr., Christchurch, New Zealand) will be joined by junior college standout Thania Marks (6-1, Jr., Birmingham, Ala.) to keep the Eagles moving forward offensively and defensively.

"Our fours have to stretch the defense," Coach Howard said. "They do a good job of being multi-faceted, putting the ball on the floor or shooting mid-range. Some of our fours can shoot the three, but they also know that they have to rebound."

Johnson and returning sophomore Lydia Freeman (6-5, Soph., Atlanta, Ga.) will also be counted on to solidify the five spot, along with Wake Forest graduate transfer Maya Banks (6-4, Gr., Chandler, Ariz.).

"We call our fives the rim protectors," Coach Howard said. "Their job is to protect the house, and to make sure nothing in the paint comes easy."

The Eagles have an enticing schedule this season, that begins with a trip to SEC foe Auburn on opening night, November 11th. The home non-conference schedule includes Fort Valley State (Nov. 13), FIU (Nov. 17), Gardner-Webb (Dec. 11), the Eagles' annual Kids Field Trip Day game against Carver College (Dec. 13) and Bethune-Cookman (Dec. 19). Georgia Southern also hosts its first home tournament since 1994-95 with the GATA Turkey Throwdown on November 26-27 as Indiana State, South Carolina State and Jacksonville State come to Statesboro. Road non-conference contests outside of Auburn include a trip to San Diego to take on San Diego State (Nov. 20) and San Diego Christian (Nov. 22), along with tilts at the College of Charleston (Nov. 30) and Kennesaw State (Dec. 17).

"We have a mix of different schemes we're going to play," Coach Howard said of the 2021-22 non-conference slate. "We're excited about opening at Auburn. We talk about being elite, and win lose or draw, if you want to be elite, you have to compete against those who are elite. Several of our ladies are from Alabama and will get the chance to play close to home and we also have our San Diego trip for our two ladies from California, so we expect to have a really good showing. We have different things on the schedule that will challenge us. FIU will look to press, so it will give us a Troy vibe. These games will prepare us not just for the Sun Belt now, but looking to the future to the new teams coming into the conference."

"The consistency, however, will be the key for Georgia Southern to put it all together this upcoming season."

"The Eagles showed glimpses of the type of team Coach Howard expects night in and night out. A 96-91 win over regular season champion Troy. Six games scoring more than 85 points in a season that saw the Eagles register the most points per game in a year in more than 20 years."

During the COVID-19 impacted 2020-21 season, the Eagles showed glimpses of the type of team Coach Howard expects night in and night out. A 96-91 win over regular season champion Troy. Six games scoring more than 85 points in a season that saw the Eagles register the most points per game in a year in more than 20 years.

"We try to have at least 100 possessions in a game," Coach Howard says. "Last year, I think we were at 70 to 75, sometimes 80 to 85. We know 100 possessions is a lot. But if we can score within the first 10 to 12 seconds of the shot clock, that's a good play. We'd love to get that down to 6 to 8 seconds. And we can do that, in my opinion, by minimizing our dribbles. In year one, we dribbled the ball a lot and took the air out of the ball. In year two, we started to learn the two dribble mentality. Two dribbles to get you a score, or make a pass to get a score."

"Tempo is a buzzword surrounding athletics right now, not just basketball. But the Eagles are absolutely committed to playing with a tempo that Coach Howard believes will lead to wins."

"We're letting recruits know where our vision for the program is," Coach Howard said. "And for the returners, it was making them believe that we shouldn't be at the bottom. We are more than capable to be in the upper echelon of the Sun Belt. We have the opportunity to be a championship-caliber team, because we've done it before here at Georgia Southern. And for the most part, we've begun to do that. When I first got here, we had a nice team. Nice and pleasant, and we played that way. You can be nice and pleasant off the court, but you can also have a 'take no prisoners' mindset on the court."

The Eagles will begin the season with depth at perhaps the most important position on the court - point guard. Returning starter Ja'nya Love-Hill (5-5, Jr., Columbus, Ga.) will mix in with a pair of transfers - Wichita State transfer Rachel Johnson (5-8, Sr., Eufaula, Ala.) and Penn State transfer Constance Thomas (5-8, Soph., Plant City, Fla.).

"We need our point guard to be the brain," Coach Howard said. "Someone who looks to push the tempo and keep the transition defense on their toes. I like a scoring point guard. You've got to be able to knock down the open shot, but also finish on the inside. And we want our point to be our most intense defender, to put as much pressure on the ball as possible."

The Eagles have an enticing schedule this season, that begins with a trip to SEC foe Auburn on opening night, November 11th. The home non-conference schedule includes Fort Valley State (Nov. 13), FIU (Nov. 17), Gardner-Webb (Dec. 11), the Eagles' annual Kids Field Trip Day game against Carver College (Dec. 13) and Bethune-Cookman (Dec. 19). Georgia Southern also hosts its first home tournament since 1994-95 with the GATA Turkey Throwdown on November 26-27 as Indiana State, South Carolina State and Jacksonville State come to Statesboro. Road non-conference contests outside of Auburn include a trip to San Diego to take on San Diego State (Nov. 20) and San Diego Christian (Nov. 22), along with tilts at the College of Charleston (Nov. 30) and Kennesaw State (Dec. 17).
"I'm not big on preseason anything," Coach Howard said. "We want to be that team people are talking about in March. Ninth is nowhere near the top, nor where we want to be. Picking us higher, it means other coaches are taking note that we're making strides, but our focus is on the end of the season."

And what are the final keys to make sure that those in the know will be talking about the Eagles come March?

"It's playing with a purpose, and not just playing," Coach Howard said. "We don't want to be super flashy, we want to be effective. We're taking the necessary steps to move the program in the right direction, and we will get there."

Copyright ©2021 Georgia Southern University Athletics