



Season Outlook

For the second consecutive year, Mercer returns four starters from its previous season. However, there is an asterisk associated with this year's squad. One of those starters will miss this year after suffering a knee injury at the end of the 2005-06 season. Mercer will also be under the direction of a new head coach.

The Bears finished 14-15 overall and 10-10 in the Atlantic Sun Conference last season, reaching the Atlantic Sun Tournament semifinals before falling to eventual tourney champion Florida Atlantic. Along with four starters, the team returns 13 letterwinners from last season, giving the Bears a lot of depth.

Senior guard Sally Skeldon, junior guard Erin Keller and junior forward Zsaquez Flucker will carry the load for Mercer this season. The trio contributed to 57 percent of Mercer's field goals last season.

Perhaps the biggest adjustment on the court will be for interim head coach Sybil Blalock. Blalock, a 1975 graduate of Mercer and star of the program's early years, takes over the reins of the program for this season. She has been out of coaching the past five seasons, but is a veteran assistant coach with 16 years of experience.

"My goals for this team are to make them better basketball players and to be good at what we do," said Blalock. "Then the wins and losses will take care of themselves."

Backcourt

The Bears return both of their starting guards from last season, senior Sally Skeldon and junior Erin Keller. Mercer returns five other guards, and adds a pair to the cupboard.

"I expect the guards to be leaders, both on and off the court. I expect them to help the rest of the team understand the offense and to know what options we should be looking at in game situations," said Blalock, a former point guard.

Skeldon led the Atlantic Sun in assists last season with 179, the sixth best single-season mark in Mercer history. The senior missed three games due to injuries, but ranked third nationally with 6.9 assists per game. She also averaged 5.2 points per game and ranked 31st in the country with 2.7 steals per game.

"I expect her to be a coach on the floor. I hope she will take advantage of her opportunities to score this year," said Blalock. "She can create for her teammates, but in the process of that she gets open a lot. I am hoping that she will take advantage of her scoring opportunities this year."

Keller started 22 games last season, taking over starting duties in mid-December. She finished third on last season's team with 7.2 points per game and 58 assists. "She has a lot of athletic ability. Some of the things we are doing on offense will lend themselves to her talent," Blalock said. "I also expect her to be somebody we can count on as a defensive stopper."

Senior Sarah Russell finished ninth in the Atlantic Sun in scoring and rebounding last season, averaging 11.9 points and 6.9 rebounds per game. Those marks earned her a spot on the 2005-06 All-Atlantic Sun Second Team and the 2006-07 All-Atlantic Sun Preseason team. Unfortunately, she will sit out the season after suffering an ACL injury in last season's A-Sun Tournament.

Senior Rhonda Owens provides depth at the point guard position. She played in every game last season, making two starts. She finished second on the team with 63 assists and averaged 4.3 points per game. "She has made improvements every year, and I expect her to improve again this year and get more playing time," Blalock said.

After initiating four freshmen guards last season, the Bears

have a lot of experience coming off the bench. Sophomore Megan Lewis played in every game, making seven starts last season. She averaged 4.1 points per game and showed flashes of excellence, recording a career-high 13 points at Jacksonville in January.

Courtney Hall, a fellow sophomore, made two starts and earned all-tournament team honors at the Oneida Casino Holiday Tournament in November after averaging 14 points in two games. Primarily an outside shooter, Hall averaged 6.2 points and converted a team-high 45 3-pointers last season.

Megan delaRosa, who played in 24 games, and Chereese Bedingfield, who appeared in 18 contests, provide depth off the bench. The duo provides Mercer with additional perimeter shooters and steady hands at the free throw line. However, Blalock feels that both need to improve their defensive and ballhandling skills.

The Bears add two guards to the mix this season, freshmen LeShonda Lillard and Heather Beckler. Lillard, a native of Bloomington, Ind., completed her prep career as the all-time leader in assists and steals at Bloomington South High School. "Between her and Sally, we have a good tandem where we can play two point guards together," said Blalock. "As any point guard should look to initiate the offense, she needs to be more aware of what shots she needs to take."

Beckler, a native of Dalton, Ga., was a perimeter threat at Girls Preparatory School in Chattanooga, Tenn. She finished her high school career making nearly 95 percent of her foul shots and 60 percent of her 3-pointers. "She has a nice outside shot," said Blalock. "We would like her to improve as a ballhandler and to learn more about the team's defensive system."



Senior guard Sally Skeldon begins her fourth season as the starting point guard, but will be asked to score more this year.

Frontcourt

Mercer must cope with the loss of four-year starter Tanya Kessenich on the block, and there will be a battle for playing time in the post amongst returnees and newcomers.

"For the post players, I am expecting to post up, receive the ball in the paint and either make an offensive move so we can either score or get to the free throw line," Blalock explained about the frontcourt. "They are going to create either for themselves or their teammates."

Mercer has 57 career starts amongst its returning quintet of post players, 28 of those shared between four players with redshirt senior Rosanna Davis making 29. The addition of three freshmen make the post even younger, but the returnees learned a lot last season in their baptism by fire.

Junior Zsaquez Flucker finished last season making six starts, including both games in the Atlantic Sun Tournament. She blossomed down the stretch, notching a career-high eight points against Jacksonville in March and grabbing a career-high 12 rebounds against Florida Atlantic in the A-Sun semifinals.

"She has begun to make some strides offensively. I am expecting her to be more of an offensive threat this year," Blalock said. "I think she has always been a strong defensive player and a good defensive rebounder, so this year I expect her to improve most on her offensive skills."

Redshirt senior Rosanna Davis played in the season opener last season, but missed the remaining 28 games after tearing her ACL in practice. She is expected to return in January, helping Mercer as it enters the bulk of its conference schedule.

She averaged 8.2 points and 5.2 rebounds during the 2004-05 season, starting in all 28 games. "She had established herself as an offensive threat in the low post," said Blalock. "Since the injury she has shown good leadership for this team without being on the floor and playing. I feel that when she comes back to play that she will take up that role as being a low post offensive threat for us."

The loss of Kessenich leaves a void on the block, where there should be ample competition for playing time and starting nods throughout the season. Sophomore Nicole Leonard made four starts last season, and averaged 3.2 points and 2.0 rebounds. "Nicole has the ability to help us become a better rebounding team and to score inside," Blalock noted about Leonard, who played guard in high school. "Being left-handed is not something that you can prepare to guard. I am also hoping that she will be a big force on the offensive boards."

TaShera Lewis, another sophomore, made 10 starts last year and played in 27 games. She averaged 4.4 points and 2.1 rebounds last season. "She is a strong post presence and has the ability to score in the paint. I would like to see her be more dominant on rebounding, both offensively and defensively," said Blalock.

Sophomore Chelsea Seabron, like Leonard, is making the transition from guard to forward. Seabron appeared in 28 games last season, making one start, averaging 2.2 points and 1.6 rebounds. "She has a lot of athletic ability and can help us take advantage of fastbreak situations," Blalock said. "She is also a physical player who will be good on the boards for us, particularly on the offensive boards."

A trio of freshmen round of the frontcourt for Blalock's Bears. Claire Neely, a native of Dundee, Miss., comes from Lausanne Collegiate School in Memphis, Tenn., after a highly decorated prep career. She was named to the Division II West Region all-state team after her senior year, when she averaged 15



After blossoming late last season, junior forward Zsaquez Flucker will be a key player in the post.

points, nine rebounds and three blocks.

"She has played mostly close to the basket. Claire has some good offensive moves with her back to the basket and is aggressive offensively. She will need to improve defensively," said Blalock.

Alex Rierison, hailing from Adairsville, Ga., is a product of Calhoun High School. She averaged 9.6 points, 6.6 rebounds and 4.4 blocks during her senior season and was named North Georgia Tip-Off Club Player of the Month three times during her high school career.

"Alex has a very good touch around the basket. Her strong point offensively is to play facing the basket," Blalock said. "We need to get her stronger and make her more of a presence on defense as well as on the boards."

Viola Kelley, a native of McCormick, S.C., will provide depth off the bench. "She is strong and can rebound well. Her strength is her defensive quickness, but she needs to work on her offensive skills," noted Blalock.

Non-Conference Schedule

After an exhibition game against Georgia College on Nov. 7, Mercer opens its season with five consecutive road games. The Bears will make a short trip up I-75 to face Georgia Tech on Nov. 10 for their season opener. Mercer will face one of its toughest challenges on Nov. 16 against 2006 NCAA Tournament participant Texas A&M.

After visiting the Lone Star State, Mercer will spend Thanksgiving weekend in the Palmetto State at the South Carolina Classic. Mercer opens the tournament against South Carolina, which went 17-12 during 2005-06 and lost in the first round of the

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WNIT. The Bears will face either Bethune-Cookman or Louisiana-Lafayette on the second day of the tourney. Mercer closes out its five-game road trip with a visit to Savannah State on Nov. 27.

"The non-conference schedule that we face at the beginning has some strong teams," noted Blalock. "I think that will give us a taste of the level of basketball that we would like to be playing at. It will also challenge us, and I think we will find out very fast the things that we are good at and the things we need to work on."

Blalock looks at the early non-conference schedule as a welcome test for the Bears. "I think that it is always good to play the people who are at the top. You learn a lot about your team and they get to see that level of competition. If you do not play teams at that level then your team does not get to see what it takes for them to improve," she said. "Although that will be a big challenge for us, I think that is something you want to do early so you can gauge where your team needs to go."

After opening the season on the road, the Bears will host Florida A&M (Dec. 9) just before final exams. Following exams, Mercer will visit Louisiana to play New Orleans (Dec. 19) and Southeastern Louisiana (Dec. 20) before taking a break for the holidays.

Mercer hosts a regular-season tournament, the Mercer Blade Holiday Classic, Dec. 29-30. The Bears will play Savannah State and UNC Asheville while Kennesaw State also participates in the two-day event. Mercer concludes its non-conference schedule on Jan. 2 when SEC foe Mississippi State visits the U.C.

Atlantic Sun Schedule

For the first time since the 2001-02 season, Mercer opens its Atlantic Sun Conference schedule at home. The Bears host ETSU and Kennesaw State on Nov. 30 and Dec. 2 respectively, embarking upon its 18-game round-robin A-Sun schedule.

After the first two games, Mercer will not face a conference opponent until Jan. 6 when Stetson visits town.

"There will be a lot of competition during the conference schedule because I believe our conference is fairly competitive from top to bottom. I think that will be good preparation for us heading into the conference tournament," said Blalock.

The A-Sun will have a slightly different look this season, as defending tournament champion Florida Atlantic left for the Sun Belt Conference. Despite Florida Atlantic's departure, the top of the A-Sun remains relatively unchanged from last season.

Belmont is predicted to take the regular-season title by both the coaches and media while Gardner-Webb, ETSU and Campbell are the consensus picks to round out the top four. The only other topic of agreement is that Kennesaw State will finish in last, but the fifth through ninth spots are a toss up.

Belmont returns sophomore forward Alysha Clark, the 2006-07 Preseason Player of the Year. Senior forward Shameka Smith, a preseason all-conference pick, will get help from 2005-06 All-Freshman Team members Jessica Bryant and Laura Povilonyte, giving Gardner-Webb a potent trio.

ETSU lost a talented group of seniors, but features 2005-06 Defensive Player of the Year Nichelle Akers. Senior forward Adrienne Rieley looks to return Campbell to the NCAA Tournament for the first time since 2000.

Jacksonville finished last season strong and features a preseason all-conference honoree, junior guard Ashley Williams. Stetson struggled last season, but look to rebound under veteran coach Dee Romine. Lipscomb stumbled down the stretch and missed the tournament for the first time since joining the league, but hopes to rebound under the veteran leadership of Frank Bennett.

North Florida surprised many observers last season, but will have a tougher challenge in the conference this season. The Lady Ospreys lost their battled-tested group of seniors who helped guide them to a seventh-place finish last year.

The Bears conclude their home slate against Jacksonville and North Florida in late February while finishing the regular season on the road. Mercer visits Kennesaw State and ETSU during the first weekend of March before heading to the A-Sun Tournament, March 8-10, in Dothan, Ala.

"I am looking forward to this season. If the practices so far are any indication of how our team is going to work together, I think we will have an opportunity to have a good year," said Blalock. "Hopefully by the time the conference tournament rolls around, we will be at the top of our game."

Atlantic Sun Conference Preseason Honors

<u>Coaches Poll</u>		<u>Media Poll</u>		<u>Team</u>
1.	Belmont (7) 97 points	1.	Belmont (16) 196 points	* Alysha Clark, Belmont, So., F
2.	Gardner-Webb (3) 90 points	2.	Gardner-Webb (4) 172 points	Adrienne Rieley, Campbell, Sr., F
3.	ETSU 72 points	3.	ETSU 154 points	Sarah Russell, Mercer, Sr., G
4.	Campbell 65 points	4.	Campbell 134 points	Shameka Smith, Gardner-Webb, Sr., F
5.	Jacksonville 55 points	5.	Mercer 114 points	Ashley Williams, Jacksonville, Jr., G
6.	Mercer 54 points	6.	Jacksonville 94 points	
7.	Stetson 39 points	7.	Lipscomb 86 points	
8.	Lipscomb 36 points	8.	North Florida 66 points	
9.	North Florida 27 points	9.	Stetson 60 points	
10.	Kennesaw State 15 points	10.	Kennesaw State 26 points	
<i>Tournament Champion:</i> Gardner-Webb		<i>Tournament Champion:</i> Belmont		* = Player of the Year