

The Oracle



Fall 2021

Sky-high expectations define upcoming season for USF



Francisco Rosa

SPORTS CO-EDITOR

The dawn of a new USF women's basketball campaign comes the rise of new and heightened expectations for a team that reached historic heights last season.

Coming off its first regular season and AAC tournament titles, the No. 21 ranked Bulls are seen as one of the best teams in the country.

Coach Jose Fernandez returns the core of a team that went 19-4 and reached the second round



Junior guard Elisa Pinzan averaged 10.3 points and 6.4 assists per game last season for the Bulls.
USF ATHLETICS PHOTO

of the NCAA Tournament, tied for the best finish in program history.

Here are a few themes Bulls fans should look forward to this season.

Favorites to repeat

In its first season without UConn in the AAC, USF asserted itself as the dominant program in the conference, losing just two

games in conference play and bringing home both conference titles.

Now, the Bulls are once again looked at as the class of the league as they were voted the top team

in the conference's preseason coaches' poll, receiving all 10 of the possible first-place votes, and are the lone team in the AAC to crack the AP Poll's Preseason Top 25.

One of the main reasons the Bulls are rated so highly is the amount of talent the program is bringing back this season. They are the only team in the conference to have multiple returning players on the preseason all-conference first and second team.

Sophomore guard Elena Tsineke and senior forward Bethy Mununga were both selected to the first team while junior guards Sydni Harvey and Elisa Pinzan made the second team.

All four players were named

■ See WOMEN'S PREVIEW on PAGE 5B

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New faces look to propel Bulls into AAC contention



Alberto Camargo

STAFF WRITER

With 10 new faces and just four returning players, the 2021 offseason was one of wholesale changes for coach Brian Gregory and the USF men's basketball team.

So many moving parts makes it impossible to truly understand where this team will be at season's end, but it'll be interesting to see how the Bulls fare.

Here are a few storylines about the upcoming hoops season.

Players to watch this season

Of the few familiar names from last season's squad, the one to watch this year is sophomore guard Caleb Murphy.

As a true freshman, Murphy appeared in 21 games, starting 18. He averaged 8.3 points per game and scored a career-high 20 at Memphis. Murphy was named AAC Freshman of the Week twice and was included in the AAC All-Freshman Team.

In terms of newcomers, look out for fifth-year senior guard Javon Greene. The Georgia native scored 11.5 points per game and shot 37% from beyond the arc as a senior, finishing his career at George Mason as the program's third all-time leader in steals.

Also likely to compete for a starting role is sophomore forward Jalyn McCreary. The



Coach Brian Gregory is entering his fifth year at the helm of the USF men's basketball team.

ORACLE PHOTO

South Carolina transfer played a limited role off the bench in Columbia but scored in double figures in his final three games, including a career-high 15 against Ole Miss in the SEC tournament.

He led the Bulls with 17 points in their 92-42 exhibition win over Voorhees College on Nov. 1.

Conference outlook

The Bulls were tabbed to finish near the bottom of the AAC in the preseason coaches' poll, along with teams like Temple, Tulane

■ See MEN'S PREVIEW on PAGE 5B

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SCHEDULES

MEN'S

NOVEMBER

- 1

VS VOORHEES COLLEGE

7 P.M., YUENGLING CENTER
- 9

VS BETHUNE-COOKMAN UNIVERSITY

5 P.M., YUENGLING CENTER
- 13

VS GEORGIA SOUTHERN UNIVERSITY

NOON, YUENGLING CENTER
- 15

VS NORTH CAROLINA A&T STATE UNIVERSITY

7 P.M., YUENGLING CENTER
- 19

VS AUBURN UNIVERSITY

7 P.M., AMALIE ARENA
- 24

VS HAMPTON UNIVERSITY

7 P.M., YUENGLING CENTER
- 29

AT BOSTON COLLEGE, 7 P.M.

DECEMBER

- 3

VS SOUTH CAROLINA STATE UNIVERSITY

7 P.M., YUENGLING CENTER
- 14

VS AUSTIN PEAY STATE UNIVERSITY

7 P.M., YUENGLING CENTER
- Orange Bowl
Basketball Classic
- 18

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

1 P.M., BB&T CENTER-SUNRISE, FL
- Hawaiian Airlines
Diamond Head Classic
- 22

BYU

TIME TBA, HONOLULU, HA
- 23

HAWAI'I / VANDERBILT

TIME TBA, HONOLULU, HA
- 25

TBD

TIME TBA, HONOLULU, HA
- 29

VS MISSISSIPPI VALLEY STATE

7 P.M., YUENGLING CENTER

JANUARY

- 1

VS EAST CAROLINA

NOON, YUENGLING CENTER
- 5

VS HOUSTON

7 P.M., YUENGLING CENTER
- 8

AT TULANE, 4 P.M.
- 12

AT SMU, 8 P.M.
- 15

VS UCF

7 P.M., YUENGLING CENTER
- 18

AT HOUSTON, 8 P.M.
- 22

VS TEMPLE

NOON, YUENGLING CENTER
- 26

VS SMU

7 P.M., YUENGLING CENTER
- 29

AT TULSA, 8 P.M.

FEBRUARY

- 3

AT UCF, 7 P.M.
- 9

VS CINCINNATI

7 P.M., YUENGLING CENTER
- 12

AT WICHITA STATE, 8 P.M.
- 15

VS TULANE

7 P.M., YUENGLING CENTER
- 19

VS TULSA

NOON, YUENGLING CENTER
- 23

AT ECU, 7 P.M.
- 26

AT CINCINNATI, 7 P.M.

MARCH

- 3

VS MEMPHIS

TIME TBA, YUENGLING CENTER
- 6

AT TEMPLE, 2 P.M.
- American Athletic Conference
Championship
- 10-13

TIME TBA, FORTH WORTH, TX

WOMEN'S

NOVEMBER

- 9

VS TEXAS-RIO GRANDE VALLEY

8 P.M., YUENGLING CENTER
- 11

VS ALABAMA STATE

7 P.M., YUENGLING CENTER
- AAC/SEC Challenge
- 15

AT TENNESSEE

6:30 P.M.
- Battle 4 Atlantis
- 20

SYRACUSE

TIME TBA, PARADISE ISLAND, BAHAMAS
- 21

UCONN/MINNESOTA

TIME TBA, PARADISE ISLAND, BAHAMAS
- 22

Oregon/Oklahoma/South Carolina/Buffalo

TIME TBA, PARADISE ISLAND, BAHAMAS
- Baha Mar Hoops Pink
Flamingo Championship
- 26

STANFORD

NOON, NASSAU, BAHAMAS

DECEMBER

- 2

AT UT ARLINGTON

7 P.M.
- 12

AT VIRGINIA COMMONWEALTH

1 P.M.
- 15

VS STETSON

11 A.M., YUENGLING CENTER
- 17

VS HIGH POINT

7 P.M., YUENGLING CENTER
- West Palm Invitational
- 20

WEST VIRGINIA

1:15 P.M., WEST PALM BEACH, FL
- 21

MISSISSIPPI

1:15 P.M., WEST PALM BEACH, FL
- 29

VS JACKSONVILLE

4 P.M., YUENGLING CENTER

JANUARY

- 2

VS MEMPHIS

2 P.M., YUENGLING CENTER
- 5

AT CINCINNATI, 7 P.M.
- 9

VS WICHITA STATE

NOON, YUENGLING CENTER
- 12

AT TULANE, 7 P.M.
- 16

AT UCF, 3 P.M.
- 19

VS TULSA

7 P.M., YUENGLING CENTER
- 22

VS TEMPLE

3 P.M., YUENGLING CENTER
- 26

AT SMU, 8 P.M.
- 30

AT HOUSTON, 4 P.M.

FEBRUARY

- 6

VS TULANE

NOON, YUENGLING CENTER
- 9

AT TEMPLE, 7 P.M.
- 13

VS UCF

2 P.M., YUENGLING CENTER
- 16

VS CINCINNATI

7 P.M., YUENGLING CENTER
- 23

AT WICHITA STATE, 7 P.M.
- 27

AT EAST CAROLINA, 1 P.M.

MARCH

- 2

VS HOUSTON

7 P.M., YUENGLING CENTER
- 7-10

TIME TBA, FORTH WORTH, TX
- American Athletic Conference
Championship

MEN’S PREVIEW

Continued from PAGE 3B

and East Carolina. Despite the team’s 9-13 record last season, the low ranking is likely a result of such drastic roster turnover.

The Bulls could serve as the conference’s wild card team this year under Gregory’s coaching. A roster with 10 new players will likely make the Bulls one of the AAC’s most unpredictable teams.

As for the conference favorites, it should come as no surprise that Houston, fresh off a conference championship and berth in the Final Four, is being touted to retain their top spot. The Cougars are ranked No. 15 in the AP’s preseason poll.

Predicted to finish as conference runners-up is Memphis, the defending NIT champions who will add the nation’s top-ranked recruiting class to the roster. The Tigers are also ranked three spots higher than Houston by the AP at No. 12.

If the Bulls are to make any noise in the conference title picture or make a deep run in the conference tournament, the matchups against these two foes will serve as a measuring stick.

Fresh faces up and down the roster

With the transfer portal having such a profound effect on the team in terms of both incomings and outgoings, Bulls fans will have plenty of names, faces and stories to familiarize themselves with in the coming weeks.

Speaking after the team’s exhibition Nov. 1, Gregory said he is planning to rely on the depth of new players with collegiate experience looking to prove themselves at a new program.

“We’re a young team,” he said. “But [every one of the new players] has played college basketball except for [freshman guard] Trey Moss.”

The Bulls have transfers from programs around the country like New Mexico, the former home of freshman forward Bayron Matos, and Triton College, a community college in Illinois where freshman forward DJ Patrick was a standout scorer.

Notable opponents

There are plenty of games for fans to look forward to before conference play starts on New Year’s Day against East Carolina.

The Bulls’ first real test of the season will be hosting No. 22 Auburn on Nov. 19 at Amalie Arena. The Tigers are just a couple years removed from a Final Four appearance of their own.

Another date to mark on the calendar is a neutral-site clash against Florida on Dec. 18 in Sunrise. It will be the program’s first meeting with the Gators since 2002.

The Bulls will play Houston twice in a two-week span in January and host Memphis in the penultimate game of the regular season March 3.

Season expectations

It’s hard to get a grasp on what to expect from this Bulls team. Gregory will certainly want the incumbent players to improve from the progress made last season, but this team will only go as far as their depth will take them.

By the time the Bulls make the 4,500-mile trip to Honolulu for the Hawaiian Airlines Diamond Head Classic the week of Christmas, Gregory should have an established rotation and roles for each player.

A successful season will depend on the integration of the 10 new players. In a best-case scenario, fans can expect a push for a top-5 conference finish and a deep AAC tournament run.

WOMEN’S PREVIEW

Continued from PAGE 2B

to an all-conference team at the end of last season.

Talented new faces

In addition to the returning players, USF also brought in a talented batch of new athletes to help bolster the team’s depth, mostly through the use of the transfer portal.

Headlining the group of incomers is Memphis transfer Dulcy Fankam Mendjiadeu.

A 6-foot-4-inch forward, Mendjiadeu was one of the best bigs in the league last season making second team all-conference, and is poised to do the same in 2021-22, making the preseason first-team this year. She led the conference in blocks per game with 1.8 and finished second to Mununga in rebounding with 9.8 boards per contest.

Her Memphis teammate Aerial Wilson also decided to join the Bulls in the offseason. She finished second in the

conference in assists at 5.9, only behind Pinzan who had 7.4 per game.

Fernandez dipped into the junior college ranks for more front court depth bringing in forwards Odeth Betancourt and Patience Williams. Betancourt, a Venezuela native, averaged 11.6 points, 8.1 rebounds and 1.3 blocks over two seasons at Panola College in Carthage, Texas.

Williams was a Third Team NJCAA All-American at Florida Southwestern State College where she averaged 13.1 points and 8.9 rebounds in her one season with the Buccaneers.

Fernandez also brought in talented high school recruit Bella Weary from DME Academy in Daytona Beach, where she averaged 17 points, four assists, three rebounds and three steals as a senior.

Daunting, exciting nonconference slate

USF has prided itself over the years on stacking its nonconference slate, consistently

scheduling top 25 opponents.

However, this year might be the most difficult task the Bulls have faced under Fernandez, possibly taking on five teams ranked in the AP Poll, including four in the top 10.

The gauntlet begins the third game of the season as the team travels to Knoxville to take on No. 15 Tennessee in the AAC/SEC Challenge on Nov. 15.

The Bulls will then head to the Bahamas for the Battle 4 Atlantis tournament, from Nov. 20-22, where they can possibly find themselves facing No. 1 South Carolina, No. 2 UConn and No. 10 Oregon. They are also set to play reigning national champions No. 3 Stanford on Nov. 26 before leaving the island.

To round out their journey through the nation’s best teams, USF heads south to West Palm Beach for a matchup against No. 19 West Virginia in the West Palm Invitational.

A pair of the nation’s best

In addition to having several of the best players in the conference, USF also has a couple of players being recognized at the national level for being one of the 20 best at their respective positions, in Mununga and Tsineke.

Tsineke was recently named to the Ann Meyers-Drysdale Award watchlist. The award is given out annually to the best shooting guard in Division-I women’s basketball. Last season she led the Bulls in scoring with 13.6 points per game.

For the second consecutive season, Mununga was named to the Katrina McClain Award watchlist, an award given to the best power forward in Division-I women’s basketball.

Mununga was one of the best rebounders in the country last season finishing third in the nation with 12.9 boards per game.



Sophomore guard Elena Tsineke led the Bulls in scoring last season with 13.6 points per game. USF ATHLETICS PHOTO

Hunger, friendship drive return of Bulls' super seniors



Francisco Rosa

SPORTS CO-EDITOR

Walking through the USF women's basketball practice facility in the Les and Pam Muma Basketball Center, above the noise of squeaking sneakers and balls dribbling on the hardwood, the presence of seniors Shae Leverett and Bethy Mununga stand out.

As the program's two "super seniors," a term used for players given an extra senior season due to the pandemic, they command the attention and respect of their teammates whether they're on the court or the sideline.

Both Leverett and Mununga were faced with the choice of ending their college careers to turn pro or running it back at the end of last season.

Coming off a season in which they helped lead the program to unprecedented heights, winning the first conference titles in team history, the main reasons for their return was hunger and winning.

"We are regular-season champions, we won the conference, went to the NCAA tournament and it got me more hungry," Mununga said. "And I was like 'Man, we did all that during the COVID period.' What about next year?"

Leverett has been with the program since 2016 and is going into her sixth year. During



Seniors Shae Leverett (left) and Bethy Mununga are returning to USF for one last season. USF ATHLETICS PHOTO

her time with the team she has become an anchor on the defensive end of the floor.

Mununga is entering her third year with the Bulls after transferring from Northeastern Oklahoma A&M College, where she was a two-time NJCAA All-American.

A starter from day one, she's become known for her energy and effort on the glass, leading the conference in rebounding last season and making first team All-AAC.

"To have both of them back, not only for their basketball ability, but their leadership and camaraderie with this team, to have them come back is huge for us," associate head coach Michele Woods-Baxter said.

While last season ultimately ended in a frustrating defeat to NC State in the second round of the NCAA Tournament, the disappointment eventually

turned into a burning fire for the two seniors.

The taste of success left Mununga and Leverett wanting more, a desire to create more firsts for a program that continues to reach new heights year after year.

"They're the first two now to ever win the conference, because UConn is not in it, to win the tournament and now it's like, 'OK, let's get to the Sweet 16, let's get to the Elite Eight,'" Woods-Baxter said. "And they looked around and they looked at our pieces and who we got coming back and they're like, 'you know what, we can do this.'"

Dedication to raising the bar is nothing new for those that have been acclimated to USF's and coach Jose Fernandez's culture. Leverett, who's entering her sixth year with the team, knows that better than anyone.

A member of three teams that made the NCAA Tournament,

she's learned from the stars of the past that the expectation is always to take the team to the next level.

"Just from like the past leaders here on the team with Maria [Jespersen], Laia [Flores], Laura [Ferreira] and them, what they instilled in me in finally winning it was like OK we've done this, now we need to set the bar higher," Leverett said. "When they set a goal they always pushed me, the team to go even further."

"We accomplished this goal, let's see if we can do even better now that we know we can make it and go to the next level."

Not to be underestimated as a reason for their return Mununga and Leverett have also developed a great relationship during their time together.

As teammates, their relationship often involves a lot of arguing on the court, but it stems

from a common competitiveness that drives one another to success and an elevated level of play.

Off the court, however, the two have formed a sister-like relationship that has given each other a strong support system and a bond that will last long after their time in school is up.

"Everyone knows she's like a sister," Leverett said. "If you see us playing on the court, we're probably going at each other's heads and everybody probably thinks we hate each other. But then as soon as we're done playing we're like busting out laughing. Like I said, little sisters, you have to keep them in check."

"We're there for each other, on and off the court, we help support each other. She thinks she's going to get rid of me after this year but I'm going to come and follow her over there in Europe."

ROSTERS

WOMEN'S TEAM



ODETH BETANCOURT, #0
FORWARD, 6'2"
SOPHOMORE



ELISA PINZAN, #4
POINT GUARD, 5'8"
JUNIOR



SARA GUERREIRO, #13
GUARD, 5'8"
FRESHMAN



BELLA WEARY, #24
GUARD, 5'6"
FRESHMAN



MARIA ALVAREZ, #1
GUARD, 5'7"
SOPHOMORE



ELENA TSINEKE, #5
GUARD, 5'7"
SOPHOMORE



BETHY MUNUNGA, #20
FORWARD, 6'0"
SENIOR



DULCY FANKAM
MENDJIADEU, #32
FORWARD, 6'4"
REDSHIRT SENIOR



MIHAELA LAZIC, #2
GUARD, 5'6"
REDSHIRT FRESHMAN



PATIENCE WILLIAMS, #11
FORWARD, 6'1"
FRESHMAN



SHAE LEVERETT, #21
CENTER, 6'2"
SENIOR



SYDNI HARVEY, #3
POINT GUARD, 5'10"
JUNIOR



CRISTINA BERMEJO, #12
WING, 6'1"
SOPHOMORE



AERIAL WILSON, #22
POINT GUARD, 5'10"
SOPHOMORE

MEN'S TEAM



JAVON GREENE, #1
GUARD, 6'4", 195 LBS
SENIOR



JAKE BOGGS, #5
FORWARD, 6'7", 200 LBS
JUNIOR



COREY WALKER JR., #15
FORWARD, 6'8", 215 LBS
FRESHMAN



LAMONT EVANS, #33
GUARD, 6'0", 155 LBS
FRESHMAN



MARK CALLEJA, #2
GUARD, 6'2", 185 LBS
SENIOR



SERREL SMITH JR., #10
GUARD, 6'4", 175 LBS
JUNIOR



SAM HINES JR., #20
FORWARD, 6'6", 215 LBS
SOPHOMORE



RUSSEL TCHEWA, #54
CENTER, 7'0", 280 LBS
JUNIOR



DJ PATRICK, #3
FORWARD, 6'6", 200 LBS
SOPHOMORE



TREY MOSS, #11
GUARD, 6'3", 180 LBS
FRESHMAN



CALEB MURPHY, #23
GUARD, 6'4", 185 LBS
SOPHOMORE



JALYN MCCREARY, #4
FORWARD, 6'8", 225 LBS
SOPHOMORE



BAYRON MATOS, #14
FORWARD, 6'9", 260 LBS
SOPHOMORE



JAMIR CHAPLIN, #24
GUARD, 6'5", 200 LBS
JUNIOR

Murphy at center of new-look Bulls roster



With a rash of transfers and an influx of new talent, coach Brian Gregory will likely lean more on freshman guard Caleb Murphy this season. USF ATHLETICS PHOTO



Richard Silva

SPORTS CO-EDITOR

Freshman point guard Caleb Murphy arrived at USF in 2020 as the highest-ranked recruit to ever commit to playing for the men's basketball team.

Murphy, tabbed as the 12th-best combo guard of his class by 247Sports, averaged 8.3 points and 2.8 assists per game in his first year with the program. All this, despite a season marred with off-court drama out of his control and COVID-19-related issues that led to a monthlong hiatus midway into the season.

After a whopping 10 players entered the transfer portal at season's end, Murphy is one of just four returning to the team

from last season. The other three include junior guard Jamir Chaplin, junior center Russel Tchewa and senior guard Mark Calleja.

Given the extreme turnover and the nature of the point guard position, Murphy now finds himself as the focal point of the offense in an unpredictable season.

"It starts with Caleb," coach Brian Gregory said at AAC Media Day on Oct. 13. "Who, prior to our pause, had been the freshman of the week [two] times in our league ... He's had an unbelievable spring [and] a great summer."

Gregory and Murphy have steadily built their relationship since the young guard arrived on campus. Murphy said the fifth-year head coach cares about his players beyond what they can do for him on the basketball court.

"We've got a real good relationship," Murphy said. "It's way more than basketball with him. It's not just when we're in

the building practicing and stuff, he cares on the court, [but] he cares off the court too.

"When I went home in May, he came to visit me when I was in Atlanta, little stuff like that."

Murphy will likely find himself as a prominent player and ball handler on the floor for the Bulls. It's also safe to predict he's destined to step into some sort of leadership role that others, such as former USF players David Collins and Alexis Yetna, may have assumed last year.

The 6-foot-4-inch guard could have an easier time adjusting to a leadership role as he has some history with his new teammates. Many come from the Atlanta area, where Murphy now lives, and freshman forward Bayron Matos, who transferred to USF from New Mexico, played alongside Murphy in AAU with the Atlanta Celtics in 2019.

"For me, being a leader, really you've got to lead by example," Murphy said. "If everybody sees you do it, then they're going to do

it. If they see you go hard, they're going to go hard too.

"You've got to do it though. You can't hold other people accountable if you're not holding yourself accountable. It's just [about] going hard [and] doing the little things."

Spearheading a roster and pushing his teammates to improve is nothing new to Murphy. During his senior year in high school, his lone season playing under coach Geoffrey Pierce with the Grayson Rams, the Ohio native used his demeanor to get the team going.

"Caleb's competitive, he's so competitive," Pierce said. "The energy was always good in practice because everything we do is based on competition. Sometimes the kids, or a couple players, they might not necessarily feel like being there, their energy is low, but with him being so competitive, the energy was always in practice and it was contagious."

His leadership style of leading

by example, which he attributes to his father's teachings, is also a familiar tactic he's used before. No matter what the situation was at Grayson, he always made sure to put forth 100% effort and set the standard for his teammates, according to Pierce.

"He's always going hard," Pierce said. "Whether it's individual workouts, drills in practice, game situations ... he's always leading by example.

"It made it easy for him, even though he was only there one year, he became one of the leaders pretty quickly just because he goes so hard everyday, so it made it easy to demand that from his teammates as well."

As the Bulls are set to tip off an unpredictable season Nov. 9 against Bethune-Cookman, Murphy only has one goal in mind.

"Just to win," he said. "I think this year can be the best Bulls team that USF's had."