

THE ORACLE

BASKETBALL PREVIEW 2023



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The four biggest storylines of the 2023-24 basketball season



Sophomore wing Carla Brito is one of five freshmen expected to take on a larger role this season. USF ATHLETICS PHOTO

By **Beatriz Gonzalez**
CORRESPONDENT

One of the most anticipated eras for USF basketball is approaching.

Both the men's and women's teams will be entering the season with new challenges ahead.

While women's basketball will have to fill the void of losing two of their key starters to the WNBA, men's basketball is preparing to rebuild under a new administration.

Here's some of USF's biggest storylines to look forward to in the 2023-24 season.

Women's basketball

Sophomores to play pivotal role

Four players left the women's basketball team last season, but some familiar faces will still be on the court this fall.

Contributing to South Florida's success last year, five former freshmen will be making a sophomore jump heading into

the new season.

Sophomore guard Janette Aarnio, point guard Marina Asensio, wing Carla Brito and forwards Emma Johansson and Daniela Gonzalez all clocked in play-time last year.

These players will not only have to perform well on the court, but coach Jose Fernandez said they will also have to take the three freshmen who joined this season under their wing.

"I think it's going to be a collective [effort]," Fernandez said. "How we compete in practice and challenge each other every day carries over to how we do in the games."

One of the shining sophomores to watch this year is Brito. She was named to the AAC All-Freshman Team, where she ranked fourth for scoring with 8.6 points per game.

Brito appeared in all 34 games last season.

Gonzalez is another player to keep an eye on. She falls closely behind Brito in stats.

Gonzalez ranked fifth on the team in scoring with 4.1 points

and 3.3 rebounds per game.

Fernandez said he wants to see more minutes from Asensio and Johansson. Both players had 31 game appearances last season.

"[Asensio] improved a lot defensively," Fernandez said. "One thing that she can do is play faster and knock down shots."

These five sophomores will have expectations to meet when they return to the Yuengling Center come Nov. 6.

Postseason redemption

After securing the regular season title, South Florida's women's basketball team was projected to easily win the AAC Tournament as well.

However, the season took an unexpected turn when USF dropped in its first round on March 7 against Wichita, 65-53.

This was the first quarterfinal elimination USF experienced in its program history.

What made the loss even more disappointing was that USF won 69-46 against Wichita

just three months prior on Jan. 7.

Every year, the expectations are high for the women's basketball team. The Bulls are already slated at No. 1 in the preseason poll for the fourth year in a row.

Fernandez said that despite the poor performance in Dallas last year, fans should have a high performance expectancy from the team.

"[During] January and February, we have a target on our back," said Fernandez.

"I like that people think highly of our program and where our program is at. We should be where we're at. I should finish in first or second [place] because we are supported and given so much."

South Florida will have a chance at redemption against some foes from previous years, such as the Shockers on Feb. 13.

USF looks to preserve its regular season title while also clinching its 19th postseason tournament appearance.

Men's basketball

Coach Amir Abdur-Rahim's debut season

USF's men's basketball had an upsetting season last year under former six-season coach Brian Gregory, only winning seven out of its 18 conference games.

The Bulls sit at a 45-71 overall record in regular season games.

South Florida dropped to ECU 73-58 in the first round of the AAC Tournament on March 9, marking the end of its season.

Only 20 days after the defeat, Amir Abdur-Rahim was announced as the program's new head coach.

He was honored as the 2023 Mid-Major National Coach of the Year one day later.

Hopes are high for the Bulls' to have a better performance this time around.

Abdur-Rahim coached at Kennesaw State for four seasons. He took the Owls (26-9, 15-3 ASUN) to their first NCAA DI tournament appearance. He also

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STORYLINES

Continued from PAGE 4

doubled the team's win each season since his arrival.

Eight new staff members are joining Abdur-Rahim's era with the Bulls -- three of which followed him from his tenure at Kennesaw.

Joi Williams, who was announced as the new chief of staff on May 16, played on the USF women's basketball team from 1984-88.

Abdur-Rahim worked under Williams staff in 2003 as a graduate assistant at Murray State.

"The best hire I made this off season was bringing [Williams] to the fold," Abdur-Rahim said. "[Williams] was the head coach for the women's team and I was

able to watch her build that program. I sat in at her practices and saw how she cared about her team [and] each individual player."

With this new makeover, USF hopes to have a better turnout than last year as it attempts to make its first NCAA appearance since 2012.

Revamped roster

Three former Owls joined the USF roster this year because of Abdur-Rahim's turnover of Kennesaw's program.

Only three players remain from last year's roster -- senior guard Selton Miguel and junior forwards Corey Walker Jr. and Sam Hines Jr.

The remaining 12

players are beginning their first season with the Bulls. Many received accolades at their previous schools, such as redshirt senior Jose Placer.

Placer scored over 1,000 career points in three seasons at UNF. He was named to the All-ASUN Third Team and the CSC Academic All-District Team in the 2022-23 season.

Abdur-Rahim said Placer's prior experience playing D1 has been a guide for younger players on the team.

"His voice has been the most important thing for our team," Abdur-Rahim said.

"He's been a great example for [freshman guard Jayden Reid], who's learning to

talk everyday. That's not something that is demanded in high school."

South Florida's opening game will be on Nov. 9 against South Carolina State at the Yuengling Center.

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USF basketball schedule takeaways

By Rachel Zangrillo
CORRESPONDENT

As both seasons for the men's and women's teams start soon, all eyes will be on USF's basketball programs – but for different reasons.

Last season, the women's team ended with an overall 27-7 record and a 15-1 conference record. Their record-breaking season has sparked high hopes for the future.

Men's basketball completed their season 14-8 and 7-11 for the AAC. The team is looking ahead to a mostly-revised roster and a new coach for this season.

Here are some key takeaways from both team's schedules:

Men's basketball

USF plays FAU only one time

FAU could potentially be USF's new in-state rival with the departure of UCF from the American conference. However, it doesn't help that they only play once for the entire season on Feb. 18.

The Owls had an impressive run last year, accumulating 35 wins and making their first-ever appearance in the Final Four.

South Florida will face five schools during conference play, one of which it has never competed against before. This will be the Bulls' first time playing UTSA, but they play them twice.

The Bulls have a 14-2 overall history with the Owls, last competing against them in the 2019-20 season. South Florida won that game 60-58.

USF's only two losses to FAU occurred during the 2016-17 and 2010-11 seasons.

Bulls to have six nationally televised games

Though men's basketball has a new head coach and a revised roster, they'll be getting less televised attention than last season.

AAC opponents and three during the Hawaiian Airlines Diamond Head Classic.

The first televised game this season will be on Jan. 12 when the Bulls take on Rice in Tampa at the Yuengling Center. It will be streamed on ESPNU with a 7

Women's basketball

A tough non-conference schedule

USF women's basketball had a record-breaking season last year, keeping expectations high

Texas later in the month to play Rice on Feb. 10. They end their back-and-forth to Texas on Feb. 21 to face UTSA.

The first game on the schedule is on Nov. 6 against UT Arlington. The Bulls played the Mavericks once before in 2021-22, which resulted in a loss for South Florida.

Last season, UT Arlington was 14-17 overall and 8-10 in the conference.

More AAC games this year

Coach Jose Fernandez said his team showed they were the best team over 16 conference games last season. This year, they will have to prove it over 18 games.

South Florida played 15 during the 2021-22 season and 16 in the 2019-20 season.

Every conference participant countrywide will play five teams twice over the course of the conference.

USF completed its ninth year participating in the NCAA tournament this past season, as well as its eighth time in the Big Dance.

The women's team will kick off their season on Nov. 6 against UT Arlington in the Yuengling Center. The men's team will begin on Nov. 9. They will be facing South Carolina State at home as well.



USF men's and women's basketball 2023-24 courtside seats are sold out. ORACLE PHOTO/JUSTIN SEECHARAN

The Bulls will have six nationally televised games against AAC opponents this season. Last year, the team had eight national live television appearances against conference teams.

In the 2021-22 season, they had six televised games against

p.m. tipoff.

The five other games broadcasted nationally will occur throughout January and February.

for this campaign.

Their non-conference schedule is a tough one again this year. February will be a difficult stretch as the Bulls go back and forth to Texas three separate times.

The Bulls play North Texas on Feb. 3 and then head back to





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MEN'S



Jayden Reid
GUARD #0
5'10" 161 lbs
Freshman



Kobe Knox
GUARD #4
6'5" 195 lbs
Redshirt
Sophomore



Gerald Jones III
FORWARD #21
6'10" 220 lbs
Sophomore



Selton Miguel
GUARD #1
6'4" 210 lbs
Senior



Brandon Stroud
GUARD #5
6'6" 215 lbs
Senior



Ammaar Balagam
GUARD #14
6'4" 185 lbs
Freshman



David Ogunleye
FORWARD #22
6'9" 235 lbs
Junior



Jose Placer
GUARD #2
6'1" 184 lbs
Redshirt Senior



Kasean Pryor
FORWARD #11
6'10" 210 lbs
Junior



Corey Walker Jr.
FORWARD #15
6'8" 215 lbs
Junior



Nic Smith
GUARD #33
6'0" 168 lbs
Freshman



Chris Youngblood
GUARD #3
6'4" 218 lbs
Senior



Kasen Jennings
GUARD #13
6'3" 202 lbs
Senior



Sam Hines Jr.
FORWARD #20
6'6" 215 lbs
Junior



Daniel Tobiloba
CENTER #34
7'0" 238 lbs
Freshman



Caitlin McGee
FORWARD #0
6'1"
Redshirt
Sophomore



Janette Aarnio
GUARD #10
5'11"
Shopmore



Aerial Wilson
POINT GUARD
#22
5'10"
Redshirt Senior



Maria Alvarez
GUARD #1
5'7"
Senior



Judit Valero
Rodriguez
GUARD #11
5'11"
Freshman



Judit Oliva
Fernandez
FORWARD #15
6'2"
Freshman



Romi Levy
FORWARD #23
6'3"
Redshirt
Junior



Sammie Puisis
GUARD #3
6'1"
Senior



Marina Asensio
POINT GUARD
#12
5'8"
Sophomore



Daniela
Gonzalez
FORWARD #20
6'0"
Sophomore



Evelien Lutje
Schipholt
FORWARD #24
6'2"
Senior



Vittoria
Blasigh
GUARD #5
5'9"
Freshman



Emma Johansson
FORWARD/
CENTER #14
6'3"
Sophomore



Lor Mputu
FORWARD #21
6'2"
Junior



Carla Brito
WING #55
5'11"
Shopmore

WOMEN'S



AD

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9/27	Depression: Tools & Resources MSC 3707
10/11 & 10/25	Trauma I & II MSC 2709 & MSC 2707
11/9	Well-Being MSC 3707

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'I stuck it out': Overcoming adversity fuels Alvarez's perspective on leadership



USF women's basketball senior guard Maria Alvarez will start this season healthy after missing the first 11 games last season due to an injury. USF ATHLETICS PHOTO

By Aaron Mammah
SPORTS EDITOR

Senior guard Maria Alvarez walked into the Muma Basketball Center with an extra bounce in her step on Tuesday morning.

Alvarez was preparing to start her individual workout before the Bulls' 25th team practice. She said she's in good spirits with the season starting in just five days.

It's the first time she has started a season healthy in two years. The process of getting to this point has been 19 months in the making.

"I finally got my body back... I'm just excited to get back out there finally," she said.

Alvarez tore her ACL in her left knee during the Bulls' 71-38 blowout win against former conference rival Houston in the 2021-22 regular-season finale on March 9.

She injured the same knee

during her freshman year in the American Athletic Conference opener against Cincinnati on Jan. 5, 2020.

She watched from the sidelines as her team cruised through the AAC tournament before falling to then-rival UCF in the championship game 55-43.

The Bulls went on to qualify for the 2022 NCAA tournament but would lose to Miami in the first round 78-66.

It was tough for Alvarez to not be on the court with her teammates during their postseason run, but she still maintained an optimistic outlook on the situation.

"It's unfortunate that it happened, but I was prepared to say the least," Alvarez said.

Alvarez underwent knee surgery on April 1. While she had

rehabilitated this injury before, it didn't negate the challenges she would face in her journey to recovery.

Alvarez spent the next four months post-surgery relearning how to walk. She would later progress to knee-strengthening exercises.

The challenges of the rehabilitation process weren't just physical for Alvarez.

She said that maintaining her confidence post-injury was one of the most important parts of her process. She relied on mental health staff to talk through the adversity she faced.

"You got to have confidence in yourself, you got to have faith in yourself. And if you don't have [enough of] that, it's tough to get back to," she said.

One of the main support systems Alvarez leaned on was her parents – Carlos Alvarez and Alba Montes.

Her parents moved from Pereira, Colombia to Miami-Bal Harbour, Florida when she was three.

Alvarez was raised to take pride in being a Colombian while fitting into American culture. She said they kept up with Colombian traditions and made dishes such as Bandeja Paisa that reminded her of where she came from.

Her perspective allows her to connect with her younger teammates who travel across the world and away from their families.

Alvarez spent the first month of the 2022-23 season on the sidelines. She used the time to observe how the team played to implement into her game when she returned.

She also built relationships with the younger international players on the Bulls' roster to help them adjust to collegiate life in the U.S.

Her teammates call her "Grandma," a nickname that carried over from her varsity days at Miami Day Prep.

She planned a trip for her and the Bulls' freshmen class to watch USF play UF in September 2022. They rented an Airbnb and watched movies together.

Alvarez is a self-described "social butterfly" who intentionally tries to involve everyone to build a family-like atmosphere among her teammates.

"They kind of have to rely on you as that second sister, that second family overall," Alvarez said. "So being able to learn just from them, of their culture, their country, their families...it's really cool when you get to bond over that."

Bulls coach Jose Fernandez has known Alvarez since she was in middle school. He said the way she's handled challenges and takes younger players under her wing reflects the culture of the program.

"She's grown up a lot in a short amount of time and she's gonna have a great senior year to finish off her career," he said during AAC media day.

Alvarez participated in team practices by early October 2022. By late November, she had a return date set for December.

She returned to the court on December 14, 2022, in a home game against Marshall. She remembered the anticipation she felt entering the game with eight minutes remaining in the second quarter.

"You definitely get the jitters at first," Alvarez said. "But once you see that ball go through the rim, that's what every shooter wants, that little bit of confidence for yourself. Because once you see it going in, I think it's lights out the rest of the game."

Alvarez made her first shot

less than a minute after she entered the game. She finished the game with nine points and made three out of her five three-point attempts.

Her first game was a major step for her but she still spent the rest of the season adjusting to playing again. She averaged 2.5 points in 10.5 minutes per game last year.

Alvarez said this past summer was the best of her career. She spent the offseason refining her skillset and rehabilitating her knee. That same summer, she graduated with her Bachelor's in Marketing.

The 2023-24 season will be Alvarez's last year donning the green and gold for the Bulls.

She said she is excited to help the Bulls win more titles and make the NCAA tournament again.

Fernandez said Alvarez will play a pivotal role in the team's success because of her composure in high-pressure situations.

"She's a shotmaker, she wants the ball in her hands. Some guys shy away from that, but she enjoys the bright lights and the tough moments."

But, more importantly, she said she wants to represent the team that has stuck beside her during the adversity she faced in her career.

"I stuck it out with the Bulls for five years, because it just felt like family," Alvarez said.

WOMEN'S SCHEDULE

NOVEMBER

- 6** vs UT Arlington
7:00 pm, Yuengling Center
- 10** vs Stetson
4 pm, Yuengling Center
- 13** vs Grambling State
7 pm, Yuengling Center
- 16** at Alabama
7 pm, Tuscaloosa, AL
- 19** vs North Florida
2 pm, Yuengling Center
- 23** at High Point
6:45 pm, St. Thomas, U.S.
Virgin Islands
- 24** at Arizona State
6:45 pm, St. Thomas, U.S.
Virgin Islands
- 25** at Texas
9 pm, St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin
Islands
- 30** vs Charleston Southern
10 am, Yuengling Center

DECEMBER

- 10** vs Gardner-Webb
1 pm, Yuengling Center
- 16** vs NC State
7 pm, Yuengling Center
- at IUPUI
- 20** 1:15 pm, West Palm, FL

- 21** at Baylor
3:30 pm, West Palm, FL
- 30** vs SMU
7 pm, Yuengling Center

JANUARY

- 3** vs Charlotte
7 pm, Yuengling Center
- 6** at Tulane
3 pm, New Orleans, LA
- 10** vs Tulsa
7 pm, Yuengling Center
- 14** at Rice
1 pm, Houston, TX
- 16** at UTSA
7:30 pm, San Antonio, TX
- 20** vs North Texas
7 pm, Yuengling Center
- 28** vs East Carolina
12 pm, Yuengling Center

FEBRUARY

- 1** at Memphis
12 pm, Memphis, TN
- 3** at UAB
5 pm, Birmingham, AL
- 7** vs Rice
7 pm, Yuengling Center

- 10** at Temple
3 pm, Philadelphia, PA
- 13** vs Wichita State
7 pm, Yuengling Center
- 17** vs Florida Atlantic
7 pm, Yuengling Center
- 21** at East Carolina
6 pm, Greenville, NC
- at Tulsa
- 25** 3 pm, Tulsa, OK

MARCH

- 2** vs Tulane
7 pm, Yuengling Center
- 5** at SMU
8 pm, TDallas, TX



MEN'S SCHEDULE

NOVEMBER

- 2** vs Edward Waters
7pm, Yuengling Center
Exhibition
- 9** vs South Carolina State
7 pm, Yuengling Center
- 15** vs Central Michigan
7 pm, Yuengling Center
- 19** vs Northern Iowa
5 pm, Yuengling Center
- 22** vs Maine
7 pm, Yuengling Center
- 30** at Hofstra
7 pm, Hempstead, NY

DECEMBER

- 2** atUMass
1 pm, Amherst, Mass
- 9** vs Florida State
TBD, Sunrise, Fla.
- 12** vs Arkansas - Pine Bluff
7 pm, Yuengling Center
- 16** vs Loyola - Chicago
4 pm, Yuengling Center
- 22** vs Albany
2 pm, Yuengling Center
- 29** vs Alabama State
7 pm, Yuengling Center

JANUARY

- 4** vs Temple
7 pm, Yuengling Center
- 7** at UAB
3 pm, Birmingham, Ala.
- 12** vs Rice
7 pm, Yuengling Center
- 18** at Memphis
7 pm, Memphis, Tenn.
- 21** vs Wichita State
2 pm, Yuengling Center
- 24** at Temple
7 pm, Philadelphia, Pa.
- 27** vs UTSA
4 pm, Yuengling Center
- 31** at ECU
7 pm, Greenville, N.C.

FEBRUARY

- 3** at North Texas
6 pm, Denton, Texas
- 6** vs Charlotte
9 pm, Yuengling Center
- 10** at Rice
3 pm, Houston, Texas
- 14** vs Tulsa
7 pm, Yuengling Center
- 18** vs FAU
12 pm, Yuengling Center

- 21** at UTSA
8 pm, San Antonio, Texas

- 25** vs SMU
12 pm, Yuengling Center

MARCH

- 2** at Charlotte
4 pm, Charlotte, N.C.

- 5** vs Tulane
7 pm, Yuengling Center

- 9** at Tulsa
3 pm, Tulsa, Okla.



Basketball players to watch this season



Senior guard Sammie Puisis finished fifth in the nation last season in three-pointers. **SPECIAL TO THE ORACLE/BRYANT HOWARD**

By Noah Vinsky
STAFF WRITER

As USF men's basketball looks to begin its rebuild and the women's squad hopes to continue its conference dominance, there are plenty of new and returning faces to anticipate watching this season.

Here's some players to look out for:

Chris Youngblood, senior guard

Youngblood transferred to USF after three successful seasons at Kennesaw State. He is arguably primed for his biggest season yet.

He averaged 14.7 points per game last season, leading the Owls while ranking 13th in the Atlantic Sun Conference. Youngblood was also named to

the All-ASUN First Team.

After the departure of guard Tyler Harris – who led the Bulls in almost every offensive category last season – look for Youngblood to step up and fill that role.

Selton Miguel, senior guard

Miguel ranked third on the Bulls in scoring last season, averaging 10.3 points per game despite only making 11 starts in 30 appearances.

The former Kansas State transfer, along with junior forwards Sam Hines Jr. and Corey Walker, is one of only three returning players from last year's roster.

Coach Amir Abdur-Rahim said that he's challenged Miguel to be a more active leader and positively influence the rest of

the roster.

"He can positively impact. He's met me halfway and he's done a great job," Abdur-Rahim said.

Sammie Puisis, senior guard

The senior guard finished last season as one of the most dangerous three-point shooters in the nation. She ranked fifth in the country with 109 made three-pointers. Puisis was named as the AAC Newcomer of the Year in her first season with the Bulls after transferring from Florida State.

Puisis has already received numerous preseason accolades, including being named to the Becky Hammon Award and Ann Meyers-Drysdale watch lists. This honor is awarded to the nation's top mid-major player

and the nation's top shooting guard.

She was also named as a member of the AAC Preseason First-Team.

Bulls coach Jose Fernandez said he thinks Puisis is the best shooting guard in the country. However, he also talked about wanting to diversify her attack this season.

Fernandez challenged Puisis during the offseason to get better at handling the ball and finishing around the basket.

"These were really the biggest things to take her game to the next level," Fernandez said.

Carla Brito, sophomore wing

Brito was one of the top freshmen in the conference last season. She was named to the AAC All-Freshman team and

received Freshman of the Week honors four times.

Brito averaged 8.6 points and 5.8 rebounds per game, ranking fourth on the team. Brito and Puisis are looking to lead the team offensively as they hope to guide the Bulls to their fourth straight NCAA tournament bid.