Florida Gulf Coast women's basketball in NCAA Tournament loaded with Colorado Springs connections

BRENT BRIGGEMAN brent.briggeman@gazette.com
Mar 18, 2021

Florida Gulf Coast junior Emma List, freshman Seneca Buckley, freshman Tomia Johnson and associate head coach Chelse Lyles, all Colorado Springs natives, pose together after a victory over Liberty in the ASUN Championship Game that placed Eagles in the NCAA Tournament at an 11 seed, where they’ll play No. 6 Michigan in San Antonio on Sunday.
Breakfast inside the NCAA Women’s Tournament bubble for one Florida team led to a conversation about Albertacos in Colorado Springs.

Whatever was being served in their San Antonio hotel, the conclusion was that the breakfast burritos at the Austin Bluffs eatery were better.

The Pikes Peak region is rarely far from mind for this Florida Gulf Coast University team, which enters the tournament in San Antonio loaded with connections to this area through the allure of warmth and sunshine and an assistant coach who opened the pipeline to her hometown.

“We were talking about different places in Colorado Springs, different things we did growing up,” associate head coach Chelsea Lyles said of a recent talk with junior Emma List when they discovered a shared childhood love of Skate City in Colorado Springs. “Sometimes it’s just good to have those conversations with your players that don’t involve basketball and you get to know them outside of that.”

Lyles, a born-and-raised Colorado Springs native who graduated from Harrison, ended up at Florida Gulf Coast as a junior college transfer and remained as an assistant following her career.

Through Lyles, the Eagles have built a roster that includes junior Emma List, who played at Pine Creek and Discovery Canyon, freshman Seneca Hackley from St. Mary’s and Tomia Johnson, who grew up in Colorado Springs and played at Sand Creek as a freshman before finishing her career at Grandview after her father took an assistant coaching position with the University of Denver women’s team.

“For me it’s just that’s where a lot of my relationships are,” Lyles said of her Colorado recruiting that also brought Fairview graduate Ashley Panem to the Fort Myers, Fla., program before she transferred to Western Nebraska Community College. “So that makes it easier.”
From there, the connections have helped feed the pipeline. List arrived first, transferring from Albany in search of sunshine. She had played on the same club team, the Rockies Basketball Club in Denver, with Hackley. Johnson knew Hackley from the time they were playing against each other in tournaments in elementary school.

"Especially since I was going so far from home, it was kind of nice to have someone from your hometown be there too and help you out," Hackley said.

Johnson, whose family has moved back to Colorado Springs as her father, Tommie, commutes to his job as CSU-Pueblo's head women's basketball coach noted the same advantages.

“That was a major reason why,” Johnson said. “I knew they took care of the Colorado girls, and it was nice to see some familiar faces as well.”

And the Colorado clique has contributed.

List, a starter, is averaging 7.4 points and ranks second on the team in rebounds (4.1 per game), assists (3.0) and steals (1.5). In an 84-62 victory over Liberty in the ASUN Championship Game that punched FGCU’s into the NCAA Tournament, List scored eight points with six rebounds and six assists.

“She’s a leader on the team,” Lyles said. “We’re just really proud of her growth and how much she’s grown over time.”

Hackley has appeared in all 28 games off the bench, averaging 16.1 minutes and 4.4 points with a 43.2% shooting percentage that ranks third on the team.

“She wants to win,” Lyles said of Hackley, who came from a St. Mary’s program that won state during her sophomore and juniors seasons and was in the semifinals last year when COVID-19 brought an abrupt halt to the state tournament. “We didn’t expect her to be as far as a freshman.”

Johnson has appeared in 24 games, averaging 2.5 points.
“It’s honestly a dream come true,” Johnson said of her experience with FGCU (26-2), which is an 11 seed and opens against No. 6 Michigan on Sunday. “I couldn’t ask for a better opportunity. Given the circumstances of COVID and everything like that, I think it’s a special year for us.”

Florida Gulf Coast enters the tournament on a 25-game winning streak, led by honorable mention All-American Kiersten Bell.

It’s a school with a history of breakout performances in the tournament. In 2013, the Florida Gulf Coast men upset second-seeded Georgetown and then topped No. 7 San Diego State to become the first 15 seed to reach the Sweet Sixteen. The team, coached by Andy Enfield, was dubbed Dunk City to reflect its style.

“It’s still a big deal at FGCU,” List said. “It’s our goal to make our mark and leave our mark here and try to make that same impact that the men’s team had.”

The women’s program at FGCU is 518-96 all-time under coach Karl Smesko with four appearances in the NCAA Tournament. The Eagles topped Oklahoma State as a No. 7 seed in the first round in 2016, then upset Missouri in a 12-5 game in 2018.

Now, they’ll head to a tournament in bubble circumstances and with a trio of players raised in Colorado Springs at the heart of what they do. It was this trio who, in a recent team-wide game of knockout, were the last three standing.

That, naturally, started a conversation about the Centennial State.

“It’s just a Colorado thing,” Lyle informed the team in a bit of trash talking with her fellow Coloradans. “That’s what we do.”

DISCOVERY CANYON REPRESENTED

Emma List is teaming with two other Colorado Springs natives in helping Florida Gulf Coast University into the NCAA Women’s Tournament at a No. 11 seed taking on No. 6 Michigan on Sunday.
One of List's high school teammates is also tourney bound. Ashten Prechtel, a 6-foot-5 post player, has been a key reserve for No. 1 seed Stanford, which opens the tournament against No. 16 Utah Valley on Sunday.

List was a senior and Prechtel a sophomore when they played together for Discovery Canyon in the 2016-17 season.