

Texas A&M plays host to loaded field for SEC Indoor Championships

COLLEGE STATION – In hosting its first SEC Indoor Track and Field Championship next week, Texas A&M University will serve as host of an elite conference event as over half the teams competing are currently ranked among the top 25 in the nation.

Gilliam Indoor Track Stadium serves as host for the three-day championship next weekend starting on Thursday, Feb. 27 and running through Saturday, March 1. Tickets for the event are available through the web at www.12thmanfoundation.com or by calling [888-826-1284](tel:888-826-1284) or [979-846-8892](tel:979-846-8892).

Aggieathletics.com will provide a webcast on Thursday, Feb. 27, which includes the pentathlon and heptathlon, while ESPN3.com will have a live webcast on Friday, Feb. 28 and Saturday, March 1. On March 10 ESPNU will feature the SEC Indoor Championships in a 90-minute special, starting at 6:30 p.m.

Seven SEC men's teams and eight women's squads occupy positions among the top 25 in the latest national team computer rankings released by the coaches association earlier this week.

The SEC men's field features the top three schools in the nation with defending SEC champion Arkansas followed by No. 2 Florida and No. 3 Texas A&M. The other four teams nationally ranked include No. 11 Alabama, No. 16 LSU, No. 19 Mississippi and No. 22 Georgia.

The SEC women's field is loaded with five of the top 10 teams in the nation. No. 2 Florida leads the way over No. 3 Texas A&M, No. 4 Arkansas, the defending indoor champions, No. 6 Kentucky and No. 7 Georgia. Three other schools nationally ranked include No. 11 LSU, No. 22 Mississippi State and No. 24 Missouri.

Arkansas will defend both SEC Indoor team titles after accomplishing a sweep on their home track last season.

"We are looking forward to the beginning of our championship track and field season," Arkansas men's head coach Chris Bucknam said. "The SEC meet is truly one of the best, if not the best team competition in track and field. The atmosphere surrounding all of these great programs going head to head is unmatched."

The Aggies, who placed third in team scoring for the men and women in their first SEC Indoor meet last season, look forward to having the meet at home inside Gilliam.

"It's a great venue for this competition," said Texas A&M head coach Pat Henry. "This is the best indoor conference championship in the United States and it'll be one of the best track meets of the year. It's great that it's here in College Station and I think we have a group here on campus along with our volunteer people who are really looking forward to hosting this championship. This is a meet that is a lot of fun to watch."

Programs competing for SEC team titles are usually in the hunt for national championships as well based on the quality and quantity of their respective talent.

"These are the schools that have an opportunity to win the national championship," added Henry. "There are a couple of others around the country, too, but the SEC is really loaded. The SEC schools really have an opportunity to win, and not necessarily in the order the way SEC Championships will finish. The NCAA Indoor is a different kind of meet than the SEC Championships."

From last season's SEC Indoor Championships there are 18 returning individual champions, 10 for the men and eight for the women.

The Gator men have three defending champions in Eddie Lovett, 60 hurdles; Sean Obinwa, 800m; and Marquis Dendy, long jump. Florida also has a strong sprint crew which includes the trio of Dedric Dukes, Hugh Graham, Jr. and Arman Hall.

"We're extremely excited about the upcoming SEC Indoor Championships," Florida head coach Mike Holloway said. "We compete in arguably the best conference in the country with world-class student-athletes and great coaches, which will make for an exciting three days of competition coming up at a great facility in College Station.

"All of the teams in our league have worked extremely hard throughout the season so far and I know the Gators are excited to get out on the track, compete at a high level when it matters most and represent the University of Florida with passion, pride and integrity."

Seven other schools have one returning champion in the men's field including Deon Lendore of Texas A&M in the 400.

In one of the many intriguing match-ups on tap for the SEC Indoor meet Lendore and Florida's Hall will likely square off in the 400 and both are key legs in 4x400 relay. Each has recorded a best of 20.68 in the 200 this indoor season and they were separated by just 0.16 of a second in the 400 on the Arkansas track earlier this season. Lendore is ranked second in the world at 400 meters with a 45.47 while Hall ranks third with a 45.63.

With eight defending champions on the women's side Georgia and LSU have two returning champions while four other schools have one each, including Aggie LaQue Moen-Davis in the triple jump. The Bulldogs return champs in long jumper Chanice Porter and Hilenn James in the shot put while the Tigers' returning champions include Jasmin Stowers in the 60 hurdles and Denise Hinton in the weight throw.

Returning SEC Indoor champions who lead their event heading into the conference meet include Lendore (45.47) in the 400, Obinwa (1:47.76) in the 800, Kentucky's Matt Hillenbrand (3:57.00) in the mile, Lovett (7.69) in the 60 hurdles, high jumper Jeanelle Scheper of South Carolina (6-2.75), vaulter Alexis Paine of Alabama (14-3.25), and Porter (21-2.75) in the long jump.

National collegiate leaders among SEC men include Lendore in the 400, Florida's 4x400 (3:04.46), Mississippi vaulter Sam Kendricks (18-8.25), Razorback long jump Raymond Higgs (26-2.75) and heptathlete Kevin Lazas (5,923).

SEC women leading their event nationally include Kentucky's Dezerea Bryant (7.16) in the 60, A&M's Kamaria Brown (22.80) in the 200, Kendra Harrison of Kentucky (7.96) in the 60 hurdles, Scheper in the high jump, Missouri shot putter Kearsten Peoples (57-5.5), Aggie Brea Garrett (74-4.25) in the weight throw, and Georgia's Kendell Williams (4,302) in the heptathlon.

Relay champions in the SEC Indoor from a year ago were Texas A&M with a conference record in the men's 4x400, Arkansas women in the 4x400 and distance medley relay as well as the Razorbacks in the men's distance medley relay.

Florida's 3:04.46 leads the nation in the men's 4x400, but three other teams are within half a second of the Gators. They include LSU (3:04.60), Arkansas (3:05.02) and the Aggies (3:05.06). Texas A&M women have the top 4x400 time at 3:31.07 with Florida a close second at 3:31.52.

Mississippi men lead the distance medley relay in the SEC with a 9:40.17, but three squads with 9:41 times follow in Alabama (9:41.23), Arkansas (9:41.51) and Florida (9:41.95). The Razorback women are the only conference team with a sub 11 minute time at 10:57.15 with Florida next at 11:00.16.

As impressive as the list of returning champions is, there is also an abundance of returning medalist seeking to improve their standing from a year ago. In the men's field there are 22 returning medalist, split evenly among 11 silver and 11 bronze medalist. The women's field features 21 returning medalist amid 10 runner-up and 11 third-place efforts.

Arkansas men leads the way with eight returning medalist, four silver and four bronze. Georgia features four, with three runner-up performers returning, while Florida also has four, two from each category, and Alabama returns three bronze medalists.

Among the women Texas A&M sports seven returning medalist, four silver and three bronze. Florida women return six medalists, five of whom claimed bronze a year ago.

The Aggie runner-up crew includes Ashley Collier, 60m; Ashton Purvis, 200m; Kamaria Brown, 400m; and Brea Garrett, weight throw. Bronze medalist for A&M includes Jennifer Madu, 60m; Brown, 200m; and Jena Hemann, pentathlon.

Even with the influx of talent returning for this version of the SEC Championships, newcomers in the form of transfers and freshmen will have their say as well.

Bryant and Harrison, transfers to Kentucky from Clemson, are national leaders in the women's 60 and 60 hurdles, respectively, while Bryant is also a strong contender in the 200 with a 22.82. Aggie frosh Shamier Little tops the conference 400 with a 52.44. In addition to her national leading score in the pentathlon, multi-talented Williams of Georgia is also a conference threat in the 60 hurdles and high jump.

Newcomers who could challenge for a top three medal position in track events also include Jalen Miller of Mississippi in the 60, A&M's Shavez Hart in the men's 60 and 200, Regine Williams of Arkansas in the women's 60 and 200, Florida's Andres Arroyo and Alabama's Jacopo Lahbi in the 800, miler Sean Tobin of Mississippi, distance runner Rebekah Greene of Florida, as well as Razorback Omar McLeod and Alabama's Tony Brown in the hurdles.

In field events newcomers in the medal hunt include high jumpers Ken LeGassey of Arkansas and Georgia's Leontia Kallenou, long jumper Nataliyah Friar of LSU and Quanesha Burks of Alabama, along with triple jumpers Jeremiah Green of Alabama, Clive Pullen of Arkansas and Auburn's Marshay Ryan.