

Lady Saxons struggle after strong start, gain valuable experience for 2003-04

3/19/03

ALFRED The Alfred University women's basketball team's 2002-03 season was one of two distinct halves. After winning eight of their first 13 games, AU lost 10 of its last 12. The 10-15 finish may have been disappointing to the team's two seniors, but for a young team, there are plenty of signs of encouragement as AU looks forward to next season. "It was disappointing, especially those last six games when we struggled," fifth-year head coach Michele Finn said. "But we have a good nucleus coming back, so that's encouraging." AU swept two games each from Keuka and Medaille, took two of three from Empire 8 conference rival RIT and split a pair of conference games with Elmira. Of Alfred's 15 losses, only five were by more than 10 points, and AU played conference powers St. John Fisher and Ithaca close on the road, losing by only eight each time. "The turnaround for us came after the (semester) break," Finn said, referring to a 2-6 stretch that began when Empire 8 conference play opened in January, dropping Alfred's record from 6-3 to 8-9. "We had some close calls, games we could have won." Finn does have several key players returning next year, but will have to replace a pair of solid and experienced performers in captains Brandi Backus (Mt. Upton/Gilbertsville-Mt. Upton) and Liz Smith (Fulton/G. Ray Bodley). Backus, a three-year starting forward and First Team All-Empire 8 conference selection this year, was the team's leading scorer (15.7 points per game) and rebounder (7.1 per game). She will leave Alfred with 949 career points and 496 career rebounds, which rank seventh and tenth, respectively, on the University's all-time lists. Smith, the team's top defender, averaged 4.6 points and 5.2 rebounds this year. The small forward led the team in steals with 51 and had 112 for her career, 10th most in school history. "It will be tough to replace Brandi's scoring, and Liz's defense will be missed tremendously," Finn said. "But hopefully everyone else will be able to step up." Despite the loss of Backus and Smith, Finn has several solid performers returning. Sophomore guard Michelle Kelly (Levittown/General Douglas MacArthur) averaged 7.5 points per game and was the team's leading three-point shooter, making 45 shots from behind the arc. And junior point guard Melissa Buck (Savannah/Clyde-Savannah) played her finest season yet, averaging 4.6 points and 3.3 rebounds while notching 86 assists and 35 steals. Also providing a positive sign of things to come was the play of a quartet of freshmen. Guard Patricia Affeldt (Horseheads/Horseheads), forwards (and twin sisters) Tess and Meghan Coddington (Amherst, NH/Souhegan) and center Kylene Knoll (Elmira/Elmira Free Academy) combined to average 18 points and 16 rebounds. With a year of experience under their belts, they should be ready to step up their contributions on offense and defense as sophomores next season. "Our youngsters really showed promise and gained confidence over the course of the season," said Finn. With a solid core of front court players returning, Finn will make guards a high priority on the recruiting trail. "We need to bring some guards in and add depth in that area." Junior guard Brenda Mulligan (Oakfield/Oakfield-Alabama) and sophomore guard Samantha Salmon (Avoca/Avoca) saw increased playing time this season and should continue to contribute next year. Freshman center Stacy Bradley (Cortland/Dryden) played well in limited action and, along with junior forward Allison Lass (Fulton/G. Ray Bodley), will provide depth in the front court in 2003-04. Alfred will look to improve its shooting, as the team shot only 36 percent from the floor and 62 percent from the free-throw line. AU did play solid defense, allowing only 54.7 points per contest while holding opponents to 34 percent shooting..