

Alfred University men's soccer team ready to take to the national stage

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ALFRED, NY -- Each season, the Alfred University men's soccer team pursues the same goal: earning a berth in the NCAA Division III tournament and the opportunity to compete for a national title. For the first time in Ken Hassler's 13-year tenure as head coach, the Saxons have realized that goal. With a penalty kick shootout victory over Nazareth in the Empire 8 tournament title game Sunday, Alfred earned the conference's automatic bid to the national championships. AU (9-5-4) will play its first-round NCAA tournament game Wednesday, Nov. 12, against a yet-to-be-determined opponent. The NCAA will select tournament pairings, as well as times and dates for first-, second- and third-round matches on Sunday, Nov. 9. Alfred roster is heavily laden with underclassmen, with one senior and only a handful of juniors, and Hassler admits that going into this season, he felt his team was a year away from competing for a conference crown. "Too be honest, our (the coaching staff's) expectation was to go for an NCAA bid in 2004," he said. The team's up-and-down performance through the first two-thirds of the season did little to change Hassler's opinion. After jumping out to a 5-0-1 start, the Saxons proceeded to drop five of their next eight. "At the beginning of the season, I would have said no" to making the NCAAs, Hassler said. "But as the year went on, I knew we had the ability to do it." To win the conference tournament, AU had to first get in. The Saxons traveled to Elmira for its last conference contest, with the winner gaining the final spot in the conference tournament. Alfred shut out the Soaring Eagles, 3-0, and after a 3-0 defeat of Allegheny in the regular season finale, had built up the momentum it needed going into the Empire 8 tournament. The Saxon defense came up big against 23rd-ranked Ithaca, spotting the host team an early 1-0 lead before junior forward Keith Phelan (Baldwin/Baldwin) knotted things up. Freshman goaltender Brian Middleton (Baldwinsville/C.W. Baker) came up huge in the nets for AU, stopping eight shots in regulation and two overtime periods as the contest ended in a 1-1 tie. Hassler turned to freshman Jim Roberts (Syracuse/Westhill) to man the goal during the penalty kick shootout, and Roberts turned away a pivotal shot as AU won the round, 4-3, to advance to the title game. In the championship game, AU and Nazareth played to a 1-1 double overtime tie, with Phelan again scoring the Saxons' lone goal. Middleton made three saves and was again lifted in favor of Roberts for penalty kicks. Roberts responded by making two saves as Alfred won the shootout, 4-1, and secured the Saxons' first NCAA tournament appearance in 15 years. Hassler lauded the play of his goalkeepers. He said the team had been working for the last two weeks on penalty kicks and his plan all along was to insert Roberts if it came down to a shootout. "Both of our keepers were phenomenal. Brian was fantastic in goal," Hassler said. "And Jimmy was exceptional. We knew that if it got to penalty kicks, we'd have an advantage. We'd prepared for it." Hassler said contributions in all phases helped the Saxons advance past the conference tournament. "We tried to come up with a team MVP (for the Empire 8 tournament) and couldn't. Our defense played well. We got a superior effort from our backs and our midfielders' effort was outstanding. We scored when we had to and obviously, our keepers were incredible." For Hassler and his coaches, reaching the NCAA tournament this year was a vindication of sorts. The Saxons came so close to reaching their goal two seasons ago, going 12-1-2 overall. Alfred outscored its opponents 52-7 in 2001 and was unbeaten (5-0-1) and unscored upon in Empire 8 conference play. Alfred's shutout percentage of .800 (12 of 15 contests) was tops in the country and seventh best all-time, and the Saxons' .44 goals-against average ranked third in the nation. Despite those gaudy numbers, the Saxons were denied the conference's bid to the NCAA tournament, which went to fellow conference co-champ RIT based on the Empire 8's tiebreaking system. A year later, the conference implemented the postseason tournament, in which the teams with the top four conference records play off for the right to the NCAA bid. Hassler is elated to have made the tournament, and is quick to point out the contributions of his coaching staff, which, ironically, includes four members of that 2001 team: Scott Wallace, Karl Gnann, Guy-Robert Desir and Kevin Ball. "We're very excited to be here. Obviously, there's tremendous satisfaction. The leadership of our former players has been key," Hassler said. "They helped build this program. It's great that they're getting to enjoy the postseason they missed out on." And what of this year's team? Are the players awestruck, or satisfied just to have reached the NCAAs? Hassler doesn't think so. "Our returning players worked hard all summer for this. And the newcomers came in ready to make an impact. We really developed a solid chemistry. For the kids, the expectation has always been, 'We want to play for a chance at the national championship.' I don't think they're at all surprised to be where they're at, and they're not just happy to be here."