

AU swimming and diving teams ready to make waves in 2004-05

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ALFRED, NY As Brian Striker enters his third season as head swimming and diving coach at Alfred University, he is confident this year's men's and women's teams could be the best he's had. That's saying quite a bit, considering his 2002-03 men's team won the program's first-ever Empire 8 Conference and state titles, while the women that year placed second and third, respectively, in the conference and state meets. Moreover, Sara Thompson, one of the best women's swimmers ever at Alfred, was lost to graduation last spring, as were a number of solid performers from the men's team, including two All-Americans. Still, as Striker prepares his teams for their season-opening dual meet at home against Nazareth Saturday, Oct. 23, he is encouraged by the return of some talented swimmers on both squads, and the addition of several promising newcomers. Gone from last year's men's team are Matt Weems and Matt McNamara, who were All-Americans in the 200 and 800 freestyle relays at last year's NCAA Division III meet. While their losses hurt, three other All-Americans senior Kevin Martin (Conesus/Livonia), junior Alex Crowell (Wayland, MA/Wayland) and sophomore Brandon Striker (Caledonia/York) return to anchor a deep and talented team. Weems and McNamara "are huge losses," Striker said. "But we have three All-Americans returning. We really have a good core of swimmers coming back." Indeed, Martin is one of Alfred's most accomplished men's swimmers in the last decade. An All-American as a freshman, he has won two state titles in the 100 butterfly and is eager to add a third. "Kevin really wants to qualify (for nationals) in the 100 butterfly and become an individual All-American," Striker said of Martin, who he calls one of the team's strongest leaders. Martin will also be crucial to the Saxons' success in freestyle and relay events. Crowell will be counted on in sprint freestyle and breaststroke events, along with the relays. Striker looks for a big season from Crowell. "He's going to swim faster this year," he said. "Even though he was an All-American, he is focused on doing better this year." Brandon Striker, the coach's brother, will be counted on to fill the void left by Weems by handling the middle distance freestyle and butterfly events. He will again be critical to the success of the freestyle relay teams. "Brandon has worked very hard in the off season and has gotten a lot faster," the coach said. "He wants to compete individually at nationals." The Saxons have some veterans who haven't yet made it to the NCAAs but who do have the talent to get there. Senior Bill Brown (Chaffee, NY/Pioneer) was second in the 100 butterfly at the 2004 state meet and is poised for greater success. "He has a lot to prove. He really wants to go to the national meet," Striker said. "Obviously, he brings a lot of experience to the team." Junior Brian Gotham (Syracuse, NY/Nottingham) brings experience as well. After earning Empire 8 Rookie of the Year honors in 2003 -- when he was conference runner-up on the 200 breaststroke and placed third in the 100 breaststroke at states -- Gotham had a solid sophomore campaign. He was second on the team in points at dual meets and was state champion in the 100 breaststroke. Like Brown, he is hungry to get to the NCAA championship meet. "He's set his goals pretty high," Striker said of Gotham. "He really wants to go to nationals." Other talented veterans Striker will count on this season include senior Nick Bradley (King Ferry, NY/Southern Cayuga), backstroke; sophomore Mike Bradley (King Ferry, NY/Southern Cayuga), butterfly; junior Jay Ferrio (Allentown, PA/Emmaus), backstroke, freestyle); senior Mike Huffman (Ithaca, NY/Lansing), freestyle and butterfly; senior Justin Kratz (Lansdale, PA/North Penn), breaststroke; senior Patrick O'Neill (Warren, PA/Warren), diving; junior Glenn Jewell (Ithaca, NY/Ithaca), distance freestyle; sophomore Trevor Covey (Alburg, VT/Burlington), individual medley and freestyle, and sophomore Lawrence Toebbe III (Merrimack, NH/Trinity), individual medley. Striker has a solid group of freshmen coming in, led by Page Beecher (Scarborough, ME/Scarborough), Jon Wordingham (Prattsburgh, NY/Naples) and Dan Schubmehl (Rochester, NY/Penfield). "Page has a lot of potential," said Striker of Beecher, who will swim individual medley and freestyle events. "He's very versatile and he had a great high school career." Wordingham will swim primarily in the backstroke events and will swim backstroke in medley relays. Schubmehl, Striker said, gives AU perhaps its best diver since Dave Berman competed from 1998-2002. "He'll make an impact in our conference," Striker said of Schubmehl. "We'll definitely be more competitive in diving." Other newcomers include freshmen Dan Skorski (Hazleton, PA/Hazleton), freestyle and breaststroke; Jerome Herod (East Aurora/Iroquois), freestyle; Al Garr (Kingston, RI/South Kingstown), backstroke and breaststroke; and Denis Egan (Maplewood, NJ/St. Peter's), freestyle and individual medley. Skorski is a fast sprinter who could develop into a solid breaststroker; Garr, at 6-8, has "a lot of potential," according to Striker, while Egan's preseason times in distance events have been solid. Striker feels the new members will help the team overcome the losses of key performers from last year. He is confident the team can reach its goal of reclaiming the Empire 8 and state crowns it lost to Ithaca last year and send at least five swimmers to the NCAA meet. "Our freshman

class has two or three guys who have the potential to replace the scoring lost from last year," he said. " We lost five guys, but we've brought in some solid swimmers, and the returnees look better than they ever have. They're focused. They didn't like the taste of second place (in last year's conference and state meets). I'm confident we'll be better than last year."The women's team lost only two seniors, but they were two of the Lady Saxons' best: Thompson and Becca Coppola. Thompson, an All-American as a freshman, holds school records in the 200 individual medley, the 100 and 200 breaststroke, and in four relays. Coppola was then team's best distance swimmer and is the school record-holder in the 500 freestyle. Still, some of the team's top swimmers are returning, and Striker is counting on them to provide leadership to a host of talented youngsters. The most experienced and talented swimmers for AU are seniors Lacy Clifford (Oil City, PA/Oil City) and Lauren McCormack (Norwich, NY/Norwich). Clifford set a new school record in the 200 backstroke when she finished fourth at the state meet in 2004 and is the team's top returning individual dual-meet scorer. McCormack was fourth in the 50 freestyle at states and had three dual-meet wins last season. "They are taking on a leadership role this year. It's much needed," Striker said, "Half of our team last year was freshmen. They're a year older, but they still need the leadership Lacy and Lauren can provide. They're our foundation." Junior Rachel Soroka (Groton, NY/Groton) and sophomore Zara Racz (Morristown, NJ/Morristown) will be counted on to step up their efforts this season. Soroka (backstroke, butterfly and individual medley) had six-dual meet wins last year and Racz (freestyle) had three. "We're looking for a lot out of Rachel. She's determined to improve and has worked very hard in the off-season," Striker said. "Zara swam well last year and then faltered at states. With that year of experience behind her, she's going to continue to get better." Other returnees expected to contribute include senior Elisabeth Meissner (Churchville, NY/Byron-Bergen), freestyle and breaststroke; junior Bonnie McDermott (Grand Island, NY/Mt. St. Mary), breaststroke; sophomore Erin Collins (Owego, NY/Owego), diving; sophomore Elizabeth Davis (Castile, NY/Letchworth), freestyle and butterfly; sophomore Genevieve Foote (New Windsor, NY/Miss Porter's School), backstroke; junior Tara Mungro (Rochester, NY/Wilson Magnet), freestyle and breaststroke; sophomore Brianna Paquette (West Burke, VT/St. Johnsbury), breaststroke and individual medley; sophomore Jessica Zekus (Tucson, AZ/Canyon Del Oro), freestyle and backstroke; sophomore Jessica White (Palmyra, NY/Palmyra-Macedon), freestyle; and sophomore Jamie Wingate (Groton, NY/Lansing) and junior Kathleen Wittich (Pine Bush, NY/Pine Bush) in diving. McDermott will be counted on to fill the void in the breaststroke events (individually and in relays) left by Thompson's graduation, while White and Davis will be counted on to contribute in relays. Top freshmen include Lindsey Scypta (Plymouth, MI/Cranbrook Kingswood), breaststroke and individual medley; Danielle Sandy (Saratoga Springs, NY/Saratoga), freestyle; Nicole Williams (Radford, VA/Radford), freestyle; and Bethany Ackley (Horseheads, NY/Horseheads), diving. Scypta may prove to be one of the best distance swimmers ever at Alfred, Striker said. Sandy is a solid distance swimmer as well and should compete immediately in the 500 freestyle. Williams should contribute in the distance events as well. Ackley, Striker said, was one of the top high school divers in the Southern Tier last year and will combine with Collins to provide a solid one-two punch in the diving events. Other newcomers include sophomore Caley Borglum (Rushville, NY/Marcus Whitman), freestyle; sophomore Jessica Brewster (Andover, NY/Andover), diving; sophomore Cassandra Clark (Springville, NY/Springville Griffith), freestyle and backstroke; freshman Kimberly Covino (Derby Lake, NY/Lake Shore) and Alyssa Ketchum (Salt Point, NY/Franklin D. Roosevelt), breaststroke; freshman Mary Hodock (Palmyra, NY/Palmyra-Macedon), freestyle; and freshman Carolyn Steere (Hornell, NY/Alfred-Almond), diving. The women's team's goals include improving on its 6-4 dual meet record and competing for Empire 8 and state titles. After placing third at the state championships in 2003, the Lady Saxons dropped to sixth at last year's meet. "We want to reverse the close losses we had last year in dual meets, and we want to get back into the top three at states," Striker said. "We're more experienced and have more depth than last year, so I expect we'll do much better."