

Stingy defense will be strength of 2005 AU football team

8/10/05

ALFRED The Alfred University football team is coming off its best season in 15 years, in which AU went 8-3 and won the ECAC Northeast Championship game. Head coach Dave Murray and the rest of the Saxons have every reason to believe they can top those accomplishments in 2005. One reason for optimism is the return of many key members from a defense that ranked among the best in the Empire 8 Conference and Upstate New York. If the Saxons can fill some holes on offense, AU should have a shot at the conference title and the automatic NCAA tournament bid that comes with it. Seven starters return on defense, including the entire linebacking corps and three of four linemen. Among the returnees is outside linebacker Brenton Brady (Rochester, NY/Marshall), last year's Empire 8 and ECAC Northwest Region Player of the Year and a 2005 preseason All-American. While the offense graduated starting quarterback Ron Duliba and starting wideouts Jake Sprague and Chris Sargent, most of the line returns intact and several promising youngsters are in line to contribute this season. Special teams will be a strength, with kicker Chris Reynolds (Pittsford, NY/Pittsford Sutherland) returning after a record-setting freshman year. Here's a look at the 2005 Saxons:

Offense The Saxons have big shoes to fill with the loss of Duliba, a three-year starter who finished his career fourth on the school's all-time passing yardage list. A pair of talented sophomore signal-callers are frontrunners to replace Duliba: Chris Barnard (Geneva, NY/Geneva), who was in line to compete with Duliba for the starting job last year before a preseason hand injury ended his year; and Paul Keeley (Caledonia, NY/Caledonia-Mumford), a transfer from St. John Fisher who led his Caledonia-Mumford High School team to a New York State title in 2003. Others who will be competing for time at quarterback include sophomores Joe Smith (Henrietta, NY/Rush-Henrietta) (second stringer last season) and Jared Hyatt (Newark, NY/Newark) (played junior varsity in 2004). "We consider competition for the quarterback job to be wide open," Murray said, "We want someone who can manage the game, lead the offense, put us in good plays using the audible, throw effectively downfield and limit his mistakes." Sprague and Sargent will be equally difficult to replace, but Murray has several talented young receivers ready to step in and contribute right away. They include junior Craig Zarzycki (Gansevoort, NY/Schuylerville), who caught eight passes for 103 yards and a TD last year, and junior Paul Torrey (Niagara Falls/Niagara-Wheatfield), who served as a backup quarterback last season. Others expected to compete for time at receiver are Ben Stanton (Fort Edward, NY/Hudson Falls), a sophomore who has been plagued by injury the last two years, but who is healthy and ready to contribute; and senior Shay Nelson (Hamburg, NY/Hamburg), who has played primarily on the junior varsity throughout his career. "We have talented receivers," Murray said. "They just need to get some more experience under their belts." Senior tight end Chris Reger (Warsaw, NY/Warsaw) played well as a junior. The former fullback caught six passes for 72 yards and two TDs and was a solid blocker for the Saxons. Reger will be a key part of the offensive attack, both as a receiver and blocker. "Chris has the ability to catch the ball and can block extremely well," Murray said. "We'll need him to be a factor." Competition at the running back positions is wide open. Freshman Stephon Jones (Fort Drum, NY/Indian River) and Julio Fuentes (Olean, NY/Olean) (both New York State all-stars as high school seniors last year) and sophomores Elmer Newsome (Cadosia, NY/Hancock) and Marcus Corsetti (Roslindale, MA/Worcester Academy), will be among those looking to fill the starting tailback position. "We have a lot of young guys competing for time at tailback," Murray said. "We're confident someone will step up and be a really good player for us." Sophomores Matt Gibbins (Clifton Park, NY/Shenendehowa), Jeff Pecoraro (Williamsville, NY/Williamsville South) and Steve Soderberg (Peru, NY/Peru) will look to start at fullback. The offensive line returns all five starters who were in the lineup at the end of 2004, including a pair of tackles senior Matt Nelson (Glens Falls, NY/Glens Falls) and junior Mike Yokopovich (Webster, NY/Webster Schroeder) who earned Second Team All-Empire 8 honors in 2004. Other starters returning to a line that helped the Saxons produce 310 yards in offense per game (141 on the ground) include senior guard Mike McCall (Central Square, NY/Central Square), junior guard Chuck Bonafede (Williamsville, NY/Greece Athena) and junior center Mike Callahan (Scotia, NY/Scotia-Glenville). Yokopovich may move to right guard to make way for tackle Justin Hanft (East Otto, NY/Maple Grove), a sophomore transfer from Mount Union. Juniors Dave Cooper (Rochester, NY/Hilton) and Paul Tulkis (Pomona, NY/North Rockland) will be among a deep group of linemen competing for playing time. "The line is the veteran group of our offense," Murray said. "We expect a lot of leadership from that unit." Overall, Murray expects the offense to go through some growing pains while relying on the defense to give the team good field position. "The most important unit on offense will be the line. They will give us a level of comfort while the skill guys gain confidence," Murray said.

Defense The Saxon defense will be the team's

strength and, once again, will be led by Brady. The two-time First Team all-conference selection led the Saxons in tackles last year with 96 (14 for loss and seven sacks) and had a team-leading four interceptions. He'll team with sophomore Blake Fuller (Newark, NY/Newark) (49 tackles, three forced fumbles and a team-high three fumble recoveries) and junior Nick Gatto (Bemus Point, NY/Maple Grove) (74 tackles, 4.5 sacks) to form an imposing group of linebackers. Expected to compete for time at linebacker are sophomores Kurt Smith (Troy, PA/Troy) and Bobby Plate (Seneca Falls, NY/Mynderse Academy) and junior Don Daniels (Groton, NY/Homer). "As a group, across the board, this may be the best linebacking corps we've had since I've been here," Murray said. "Brenton is a game changer...an impact player. He's flat out one of the best players in the country." Fuller, a converted safety who earned Empire 8 honorable mention in 2004, is fast, strong and a big hitter. Gatto has worked hard to improve his game and should be a force in the middle. While the defense will miss the presence of end Bill Battaglia, a First Team all-conference and all-ECAC selection who had a team-leading 16 tackles for loss and 11 sacks last year, three starting linemen return. They include junior end Andy Rantz (Montandon, PA/Milton Area) and sophomore tackles Don Miller (LeRoy, NY/LeRoy) and Ray Simpson (Hauppauge, NY/Hauppauge). Rantz (44 tackles, 5.5 for loss and one INT) and Miller (40 tackles and two sacks) were all-Empire 8 honorable mention picks while Simpson finished with 32 tackles, including three for loss, and three fumble recoveries. Murray expects several youngsters, including sophomore tackle Mike Penkin (Rochester, NY/Greece Athena), junior end Chris Mayotte (Syracuse, NY/Onondaga), sophomore ends Ryan Katta (Forrestville, NY/Forrestville) and Travis Cox (Bradford, RI/Westerly) and freshman end Jake Syracuse (LeRoy, NY/LeRoy) to step in and contribute to the defensive line. "We have three of four starters returning and a lot of depth on the line," Murray said. "With the front seven we have, our run defense should be outstanding." The least experienced unit on defense will be the secondary. Although junior two-year starting strong safety Aaron Meyers (Delevan, NY/Pioneer) returns, both corners (including three-year starter and all-conference pick Ray Sawner) graduated, as did free safety Kiel Liddell. Meyers has been solid in each of his first two years with the Saxons, earning Empire 8 Defensive Rookie of the Year honors in 2003 and finishing second on the team in tackles last year with 77 (3.5 for loss) and a team-leading 10 passes defended. He was an honorable mention All-Empire 8 pick in 2004. Junior Mike Coupe (New Hartford, NY/New Hartford) saw action mostly as a nickelback in 2004, finishing with 18 tackles and two INTs. He'll compete for one of the starting corner jobs this season. Others expected to vie for time in at corner include sophomore Ron Smith (Lyons, NY/Lyons), freshman cornerback Kirk Luvison (Hornell, NY/Hornell) (a 2004 First Team All-New York State selection) and sophomore Josh Rammacher (Angola, NY/Lake Shore), the Saxons' starting punter last season. Vying for time at free safety will be sophomore Dan Medlock (Garden City Park, NY/Mineola) and junior Jake Rulander (Russell, PA/Eisenhower). "The secondary is our most inexperienced unit on defense," Murray said. "There are some question marks at corner, but we have some talented players looking to step in and contribute. I think we'll need our front seven to pressure the quarterback and disrupt the passing game to take some of the pressure off the defensive backs." Special Teams The Saxons' kicking game should be one of the team's strong suits in 2005. Reynolds earned honorable mention from the Empire 8 as a freshman in 2004, when he made 13 of 19 field goals and 29 of 30 extra point attempts. His 68 points set a new AU single season scoring record for placekickers. "Chris worked very hard this offseason and will come into 2005 with a lot of confidence," said Murray. Junior Anthony Marchillo (Saratoga Springs, NY/Saratoga Springs) will likely back up Reynolds. Rammacher also earned Empire 8 honorable mention as a freshman punter last year, when he averaged 37.5 yards per punt. Rammacher, who may play cornerback this season, will compete for the starting punter's job with junior Pat Kreski (House Springs, MO/St. John Vianney) and freshman Kris Sambor (Webster, NY/Webster Thomas). Sargent was the AU's primary return man last season and filling his shoes won't be easy. Fuentes and Zarzycki, along with freshman Xavier Marshall (Fairport, NY/Fairport), will be among those looking to return kickoffs and punts for the Saxons in 2005. Overall, Murray looks for the defense to lead the team this season. Coaches are counting on the offense to limit its mistakes, improve steadily (especially at the skill positions) and take advantage of scoring opportunities. "The big thing will be how quickly our skill players become game ready. How fast they come along will determine our success," Murray commented. "There is the potential for our defense to be every bit as good as it was last year. Our run defense will be exceptional. How well we defend the pass will be critical."