

## Improved Lady Saxons looking to make noise in Empire Eight

10/26/00

Alfred University head women's basketball coach Michele Finn is openly optimistic about the upcoming 2000-01 season. After a disappointing 4-20 season, Finn is confident that this year's squad will surprise a majority of critics. "We have more leaders, more experience, new talent and more of a hunger to win," Finn says. "Hopefully that all adds up to success for us." Juniors Lisa Valitutto (Amherst, NH/Souhegan) and Amy Ratchuk (South Buffalo/Mt. Mercy) will once again be expected to lead the Lady Saxons to victory. Valitutto, a 5-10 power forward, is coming off a season in which she averaged 12.9 points and 8.6 rebounds, catapulting her career numbers to 17th among Alfred's all-time leading scorers and 11th among all-time rebounding leaders. With a strong supporting cast, Valitutto is expected to improve upon those numbers, as she will be less likely to battle double and triple teams. "Lisa makes things happen on the floor," Finn said. "I expect her to post the same numbers as last year but with less frustration." The counterpart of the Lady Saxon's deadly inside-outside game is Ratchuk. The 5-8 shooting guard led the Empire Eight conference in scoring last season, averaging 16.5 points per game. Finn believes a key factor to this team's success will be the production of big numbers by Ratchuk. "Amy was our MVP last season. She is a great shooter and overall offensive threat, teams are doing whatever they can to stop her," Finn says. "She will be a big key to our success this season." Of the other returning players, Finn is especially excited about the prospective play of 5-10 forward Brandi Backus (Mt. Upton/Gilbertsville-Mt. Upton). Backus returns for her sophomore year after missing several games last season with a knee injury. According to Finn, "Brandi is going to be key in the post. Last season we ran out of games for her, she was just starting to peak as the season ended." Another returning player that Finn expects will keep defenses honest and aid in the balancing of the Lady Saxon offense, is junior Nicole Yoculan (Erie, PA/Villa Maria). Yoculan is an aggressive off-guard with tremendous desire and great leadership capabilities. "Nicole hustles up and down the floor and is a good role model for the younger players," Finn says. The Lady Saxon's lone senior is floor leader Lee Ann Kushner (Bliss/Letchworth). The 5-1 point guard led the team in assists last year, averaging 2.83 dishes a game. "We're looking at Lee Ann to provide leadership," Finn stated. "This is her senior year and it's her time to bring all the returning players and newcomers together on the floor and lead us to a successful record and Empire Eight Championship." Other key returnees include a quartet of sophomores: forward Alison Savett (Merion, PA/Akiba Hebrew Academy), center Leyna Madison (Livingston Manor/Livingston Manor) and guards Liz Smith (Fulton/G. Ray Bodley) and Jessy Natal Newark, NJ/Montclair Kimberly Academy). Besides a strong optimistic faith in her returning players, Finn also senses incredible potential in her new recruits. "The new players look real good. There is a lot of talent there." Freshman Melissa Buck (Savannah/Clyde-Savannah) has Finn anxiously anticipating the start of her career. "Melissa is going to be very competitive at the point guard position," Finn predicts. "She is going to be a player to watch." Finn is confident that the addition of her new freshman to her solid base of returning players will result in a more balanced offensive attack. Thus, allowing the Lady Saxons to execute the inside-outside game that Finn feels is essential for the team to be successful. "When teams stop us inside, we need to be able to kick it out. If they stop us outside, we need to be effective inside." However, the key to a successful 2000-01 campaign lies in the ability of the Lady Saxons to execute for a full 40 minutes. The 1999-2000 campaign was plagued by inconsistent play. "Last year we would have flashes of brilliance, then complete breakdowns," Finn says. "We're going to dictate what happens to us. Last year we were our own worst enemy. Instead of trying not to lose, we're going to come out and try to win." This year the Lady Saxons are all on the same page, focusing on one philosophy, united by one motto: "We mean business." "We're not going to be walked on anymore," Finn says. "We're going to surprise people, we're a different team." Finn realizes that the road to becoming an Empire Eight powerhouse is not going to be an easy one. "There are no lame ducks on our schedule," she says. "This is a very competitive conference, at least five teams or more have been to the NCAA Tournament." Despite the tough competition the Lady Saxons remain optimistic about the upcoming 2000-01 season. Their goal is to win the Empire Eight and finish the season strong with a winning record. According to Finn, "You're going to see us compete for the top spot in the Empire Eight conference. I believe we will surprise some people. We are ready to work hard and work together as a team in our quest for the top spot in the Empire Eight."