

AU men's swimming and diving team now one of New York State's best

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ALFRED, NY Has there been a more powerful Division III men's swimming and diving team in New York State over the last five years than Alfred University's Saxons? It would be hard to argue against such a claim after Alfred capped off a dominating 2006-07 season with the school's second-ever Upper New York State Collegiate Swimming Association (UNYSCSA) championship and third Empire 8 Conference title. In the last five years since head coach Brian Striker took over the program, the Saxons have two UNYSCSA titles, sandwiching the school's first state championship (won in 2003) and this year's title around three runner-up finishes. During that period, Alfred has gone 35-8 in dual meets, including 19-6 in Empire 8 action. This year, Alfred went a perfect 10-0 in dual meets, the first time in 18 years the team has had an unbeaten regular season. "I look at that (unbeaten season) as a tremendous accomplishment because we swim against some strong Empire 8 teams," Striker said, referring to Hartwick, RIT and Ithaca, which placed second, fourth and fifth, respectively, at the UNYSCSA meet. "Only three other (AU) teams have done it, and all were ranked top-10 nationally." Reflecting on the success he's enjoyed to start his coaching career he won UNYSCSA and Empire 8 Coach of the year honors, the third time in five years he's swept both awards Striker expresses pride while at the same time setting his sights on greater things. "To be consistently one of the best teams in the state is impressive," said Striker, the UNYSCSA and Empire 8 Coach of the Year this season. "But my goals are higher than that. I want to become one of the top 10 teams in the country. We aren't there yet, and it won't be easy, but I want even more for this team." Winning the UNYSCSA title was the team's primary goal, and AU dominated the state meet, finishing nearly 100 points ahead of runner-up and 2006 state champ Hartwick. The pieces are in place for another title run in 2008, as AU returns all but one swimmer. The lone senior, four-year standout Brandon Striker (Caledonia, NY/York), the coach's younger brother, will be missed. An All-American as a freshman in 2004, Striker was one of the state's top butterfly specialists this season and has been invaluable in relays throughout his career. "Brandon has been one of the best swimmers in our conference the last four years and he's been a tremendous team leader," Brian Striker said. "We've become a very good team and Brandon's been a big part of that. It will be hard to replace someone like that." Still, the Saxons have a host of talented and experienced swimmers and divers returning, led by junior Page Beecher (Scarborough, ME/Scarborough), sophomore brothers Mark and Matt Baker (Weedsport, NY/Weedsport), sophomore Brian Agro (Gray, ME/Cheverus), and freshman Andrew Brisson (Greenwich, CT/Greenwich). Matt Baker was the Swimmer of the Meet at the Empire 8 championships and was the Saxons' lone NCAA championship meet participant. He qualified in the 100-yard backstroke, earning honorable mention All-American honors at the nationals, and swam the 200-yard back and 50-yard freestyle as optional events. Beecher, the school record-holder in the 400-yard individual medley placed third in that event and second in the 200 IM at the state meet, earning First Team all-Empire 8 honors in both. Matt Baker's win brother, Mark, and Brisson (the Empire 8 Rookie of the Year and state champ in the 100-yard and 200-yard freestyle) are a formidable one-two punch in the sprint freestyles. Mark Baker won the 50-yard freestyle at the state meet (Brisson was sixth) and was second and third, respectively, in the 100-yard and 200-yard freestyle races. Agro has done well in the breaststroke (his signature stroke) as well as the individual medleys. At the state meet, he earned top-eight finishes in the 200 breast (fourth), 100 breast (fifth) and 200-yard IM (sixth). With the return of most of his squad aside from Brandon Striker, the Saxons lose only one other senior, Trevor Covey (Alburt, VT/Burlington), to graduation Striker is excited about his team's chances of repeating as state champs in 2008. "I think anything less than a state title will be disappointing," he said. "We lose two seniors. That's the least of any of the top six teams in at states." Indeed, the depth that helped carry the Saxons to the state championship returns intact next year. Returning swimmers include junior Jon Wordingham (Prattsburgh, NY/Naples) (backstroke), sophomores Scott Sarkissian (Oswego, NY/Oswego) (butterfly), Tyler Monroe (Conesus, NY/Livonia) (distance freestyle) and Dan Staples (Wilbraham, MA/Wilbraham Monson) (breaststroke) and freshman Kyle Crozier (South Portland, ME/South Portland) (breaststroke). Also, a solid group of divers, each of whom scored at the state meet junior Dan Schubmehl (Rochester, NY/Penfield) and freshmen Kameron Chambliss (Alfred Station, NY/Alfred-Almond) and Sipol Smakpant (Colorado Springs, CO/Sierra) also return. "Depth was a concern at the beginning of the year, but our middle guys proved we have good depth," Striker said. "Each of our classes has at least four gifted athletes and if we get a good freshman class, it will get even better."