

Veteran women's lacrosse team pushing for Empire 8 tournament berth

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ALFRED, NY A roster dominated by veterans, with 10 of 12 starters returning, has the Alfred University women's lacrosse team poised to compete for its first-ever Empire 8 Conference championship tournament. "This is my first year with a senior class," remarked fourth-year head coach Samantha Valder, whose roster boasts nine seniors, six of them returning starters. "The team's confidence has grown every year. The senior leadership is tremendous and the team is really working well together." The Lady Saxons' offense will be particularly strong, with nearly all of the team's goal scoring returning from last year's 4-7 squad. The attack will be led by junior Michelle Adams (Horseheads, NY/Horseheads), the leading scorer the last two seasons (44 goals, three assists in 2009, along with 26 groundballs) and an Empire 8 honorable mention all-star a season ago. Senior attackers Abbey Schaffnit (Bemus Point, NY/Maple Grove) (13 goals, 11 assists, 26 groundballs, 20 draw controls) and Emily Tobin (Penfield, NY/Penfield) (nine goals, team-best 19 assists, 19 groundballs) also return. They'll be joined on attack by senior Bailey Umphries (Heuvelton, NY/Heuvelton) (three goals, two assists in 2009), junior Ashley Denio (St. Marys, PA/Elk County Catholic) (one goal, one assist) and sophomores Emily Crosby (Fairport, NY/Fairport) (one assist in five games) and Ivy Lam (Sanford, ME/Sanford) (one goal in seven contests). "I'm extremely excited about our attackers," Valder said. Alfred's offense is further bolstered by a solid midfield, led by junior Elyse Caldwell (Endwell, NY/Maine-Endwell), senior Kate Simonds (Park City, UT/Park City) and freshman Ali Garcia (Salt Lake City, UT/Judge Memorial). Caldwell, an honorable mention Empire 8 all-star last year, was fourth on the team in scoring (eight goals and seven assists) and had 27 groundballs (second on the team). Simonds saw action in 11 games and had two goals and three assists, and Garcia is a former high school All-American (U.S. Lacrosse, 2008) who should add immediate scoring punch. Senior Amanda Sullivan (Lexington, MA/Lexington) is one of the team's top defenders and should see time both on defense and in the midfield. She had a pair of goals to go with 25 groundballs in 2009. Adding depth to the midfield will be freshmen Devon Fitzgerald (Rochester, NY/Greece Olympia) and Tracie McGinnity (Rochester, NY/Gates-Chili). "We'll be so much better on offense this year," Valder said. "We'll count on our veterans to score, but with the addition of (Garcia), our offense should be even stronger. With Ali, defenses won't be able to focus as much on our attackers." Alfred's defense is strong, with three starting senior defenders Sullivan and 2009 all-conference honorable mention picks Lisa Button (Troupsburg, NY/Jasper Troupsburg) and Emily Steen (South Pasadena, CA/Purnell School) joining sophomore starter Hannah Scott (Randolph, VT/Randolph Union). Button had seven goals and an assist to go with 25 groundballs and Steen had six goals, six assists along with a 26 groundballs and 18 draw controls. Steen and Sullivan shared the team lead in caused turnovers with 16. Scott had a goal and an assist and shared the lead with Caldwell for groundballs among field players with 27. Adding depth to the AU defense will be senior Amanda Empey (Bloomfield, NY/Bloomfield) (eight games, two groundballs), junior Emily Merkey (Walworth, NY/Wayne), who was a first-time player as a sophomore last year and had a pair of groundballs in five games, senior Meaghan Hudson (Manlius, NY/Fayetteville-Manlius) and freshman Chelsea Gill (Winfield, PA/Lewisburg). Returning in goal is two-year starter Kate Baughman (Rush, NY/Rush-Henrietta). The junior played every minute between the pipes last season and had a 12.45 goals against average and .496 save percentage and led the team with 34 groundballs. Valder points to the balance and depth at all positions as key to the Saxons' improvement in 2010. "It's huge for us. Last year, we needed our offense to make up for the defense in some games, and vice versa. This year, we'll be strong in both areas

and will be able to transition the ball so much better."Experience is key as well. "We aren't having to work so much on the fundamentals of the game now. The team knows what I expect of them and we have a group of seniors who will help our younger players along."Experience, talent and depth has Valder optimistic this year's team can break through and earn the school's first-ever berth in the Empire 8 tournament, the winner of which gets the conference's automatic bid to the NCAA championships. "I expect us to increase our win total from a year ago and be much more competitive in the Empire 8," Valder said.AU opens its season March 13 at Allegheny and plays its home opener March 17 against Keuka.