

Youthful AU women's basketball team has great potential

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ALFRED, NY - With a young squad - 13 of 16 players on the roster are either freshmen or sophomores - Alfred University head women's basketball coach Jay Murphy expected the Saxons to experience growing pains this year. But as the season progresses, he expects the team to improve steadily, improve on last year's 10-15 record (5-11 Empire 8) and be a factor in the Empire 8 Conference, competing for the program's first-ever berth in the conference championship tournament. "We're young, but we have some good players," he said of a roster that has only two seniors and two of five starters from last year. They have a good work ethic, and if they keep getting better every, day, there is good chance we could get one of the four (conference tournament) spot. I'd be very happy if that happened, and it's something I think we can do." Murphy, in his fourth season as the women's coach at Alfred, said the team will rely on defense, rebounding and limiting turnovers, particularly early in the year, as the players get acclimated to the offense. "We need to emphasize defense first, force turnovers and get points off others teams' mistakes," Murphy said. Murphy must replace his two leading scorers from a year ago: three-year starting guard Lyndsay Murphy (15.8 point per game), a three-time Empire 8 all-star, and two-year starting point guard Courtney Lincoln (9.0 ppg). Senior Christina Jordan (Cornwall-on-the-Hudson, NY/Cornwall) and sophomore forward Grace Williamson (Olean, NY/Olean) are the top two returning scorers from 2010-11 and will be counted to carry much of the offensive load this season. Jordan averaged 7.8 points and 3.4 rebounds per game last year, and made 47 three-point shots (second most on the team) out of a total of 57 field goals made. Jordan, who shot only six foul shots all last year, will look to penetrate and get more free-throw opportunities. "We need (Jordan) to shoot better and more consistently while playing solid defense," Murphy commented. Williamson was one of the top freshmen in the Empire 8 last year, averaging 8.5 points (on a team-best 41.4 percent shooting) and 7.4 rebounds per contest. She also proved to be a solid defender, leading the league in blocked shots (1.6 per game). "We're looking for Grace to average close to a double-double this year and be a leader in the post. She did a great job last year and we're looking for her to keep getting better," Murphy said. Senior Kacey Kwiecien (Perry, NY/Perry) has served as a solid backup at the point since her freshman year and will be counted on to run the offense and play sound perimeter defense as a starter this season. She played in 22 games a season ago and averaged 2.3 points and 1.5 rebounds, and had 40 assists, third-most behind Lincoln's 81 and Murphy's 79. "She's been playing with a lot of confidence and has been aggressive defensively," Murphy said of Kwiecien. "We just need her to play smart at the point and hit her shots when she's open." Joining Jordan and Kwiecien in the three-guard starting lineup will be heralded freshman Harley Cleary (Rochester, NY/Our Lady of Mercy). Cleary scored more than 1,000 points at Nazareth Academy and Mercy and was a First Team All-Greater Rochester selection a season ago. She can play the two- and three-guard positions and fill in at the point and will come in as a solid defender. "She's very good penetrating to the hoop, is a good passer and is solid defensively," Murphy said of Cleary. "She was a thousand-point scorer, but she was also her (high school teams') defensive stopper. She's just a good all-around player." Junior shooting Cate Mensler (Ballston Spa/Saratoga Catholic) will see time at shooting guard and on the wing. She averaged 1.7 points and 1.2 boards in 2011-12 and possesses one of the top inside games among the Saxon guards. Freshman Emilea Harrison (Dansville, NY/Dansville) will also look to earn a spot in the rotation. Sophomore Brittany McFadden (Brooklyn, NY/Midwood) and freshman Amanda Schlee (Coram, NY/Newfield) provide backcourt depth. Joining Williamson in the frontcourt will be sophomore forward Sarah Federico (Buffalo, NY/Holy Angels) and a group of freshman forwards led by Lindsay Drummond (Ogdensburg, NY/Ogdensburg). Federico averaged 3.0 points and 4.7 rebounds last year. "Drummond has good offensive post moves and rebounds well," Murphy said. "We'll look for Federico to be more consistent on the offensive end, score some points, play solid post defense and rebound." Other players competing for time in the frontcourt are freshmen Brennan Ferguson (Destrehan, LA/Ursuline Academy) and Shea Oleksa (Seneca Falls, NY/Mynderse Academy). Both play good defense and rebound well and will look to develop their offensive games as the season progresses. Adding depth at the forward position are junior Jamie Perry (Hannibal, NY/Hannibal), who can also play guard, and sophomores Erin Patterson (Portland, NY/Fredonia) and Kelly McNamara (Harleysville, NY/Tri-Valley). Alfred's defense last year was solid - opponents shot less than 36 percent from the floor - and the Saxons were about even in rebounding and turnovers. But Alfred shot only 33 percent and opponents made it to the foul line 123 more times than the Saxons. Murphy says all those numbers must improve in the Saxons' favor for the team to compete for an E8 tournament berth. "The offense will come, but until then we'll need to play solid defense, rebound and avoid turnovers," he said.

"We can't give up offensive rebounds because the other team will kill us with second-chance points. We don't want to be even with other teams in rebounding; we want to be way ahead. "