

Youngsters counted on to lead AU women's basketball team

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ALFRED, NY — With not a senior on the roster, youth will serve the 2012-13 women's basketball team, which replaces three departed starters as it looks to improve on a season in which the Saxons went 8-17 (1-13 Empire 8).

Head coach Jay Murphy said his young squad has shown improvement throughout the preseason, and he expects that to continue when the season opens Nov. 16 and 17 at the Buff State Tournament.

“We’re a young team, with no seniors. We need to keep working to stay more consistent with our focus,” said Murphy, in his fifth year at the helm of the AU women's team. “It’s a learning process, but that’s been our team’s motto: Just keep getting better every day.”

Despite the team's relative youth, it is not without experience. Leading this year's squad will be sophomore guard **Harley Cleary (Rochester, NY/Mercy)**, who as a freshman averaged 14.6 points (second on the team) and 4.1 rebounds en route to earning Empire 8 Conference honorable mention honors. Cleary had 52 assists and 37 steals (both second on the team), and was one of the top free-throw shooters in the nation, making 86 percent (79 of 92) of her foul shots.

“Harley will do a little bit of everything for us,” Murphy said of Cleary, who can play the point as well as the two- and three-guard spots. “She can score from inside and on the drive, is a good passer, plays solid defense and can rebound well for a guard. I expect her to continue to get better. Her potential is unlimited.”

One other starter junior forward **Sarah Federico (Buffalo, NY/Holy Angels)** also returns. The 5-10 Federico played in all 25 games (16 starts) and averaged 6.9 points and 4.5 rebounds (second on the team), a marked improvement over her freshman year.

“Sarah came in physically and mentally stronger than last year and it shows,” Murphy said. “She can score and defend in the post, and can rebound on both ends. She just needs to be more consistent with her game.”

While the Saxons lost three starters forward Grace Williamson, shooting guard Christina Jordan and point guard Kacey Kwicien who combined for 24.1 points per game last season, several capable reserves will look to step in this year. They include sophomore forward **Lindsay Drummond (Ogdensburg, NY/Ogdensburg)** and junior guard **Cate Mensler (Ballston Spa, NY/Saratoga Catholic)**.

Drummond played in 25 games and made nine starts, averaging 5.8 points and 3.9 rebounds while making 82.1 percent

of her free throws (23 of 28). She made 12 three-point shots (tied for third on the team), and at 5-11, creates matchup problems for opposing defenses. Mensler saw action in 25 contests (seven starts) and averaged 2.9 points and 2.6 rebounds while dishing out 33 assists.

“In the preseason, Lyndsay played as well as any of our post players. She’s developed a good rip-and-go move and she has that ability to hit from the outside,” Murphy commented. “Cate is one of our faster players, which will suit her well as we look to run more this year. She can hit from 18 feet and in and is very good in transition.”

Sophomore forwards **Shea Oleksa (Seneca Falls, NY/Mynderse Academy)** (21 games, 1.2 points, 1.1 rebounds per contest) and **Brennan Ferguson (Destrehan, LA/Ursuline Academy)** (12 games, 1.4 points per game) and sophomore guard **Emilea Harrison (Conesus, NY/Dansville)** (17 games, 3.1 points per game) were reserves as freshmen and will be counted on to step up their contributions this year.

“Shea has had some really good practices, where she’s shown she can hit her shot. She can knock down the open 15-footer and she’s gotten much better defensively. We need her to rebound on both ends and be a more consistent player,” Murphy said.

Murphy expects Harrison, who played well early in the year before missing time with illness, to see meaningful minutes right away. “She can play all three (guard) spots, can hit the three and can score or pass off the drive,” he said.

Junior center **Erin Patterson (Portland, NY/Fredonia)**, at 6-1, can provide AU a post presence. She played in nine games as a sophomore and averaged 1.8 points and two rebounds. Rejoining the team after taking last season off is junior guard **Rachael Stedman (Hamburg, NY/Springville Griffith)**.

Three freshmen join the team in 2012-13: guards **Emma Graham (Groton, NY/Groton)** and **Heather Hebert (Hilton, NY/Hilton)** and forward **Hailey Sick (Dansville, NY/Dansville)**.

Murphy said Hebert has a good chance to step into the starting lineup.

“She moves well without the ball and can shoot, drive or pass. She may be our best perimeter defender,” he said. “She’s just a really hard-working kid.”

Sick may be one of the team’s strongest post players and possesses solid moves down low to complement a jumper that’s good from 15 feet. “She’ll contribute right away for us,” Murphy said.

Murphy said rebounding will be crucial for his team's success. While the Saxons held opponents to 40 percent shooting last season, the team was sometimes hurt by the other teams' second-chance opportunities. Alfred's ability to rebound on the defensive end will also allow for opportunities in transition. Taking advantage of those opportunities will be key, Murphy said.

"Last year, we'd push the ball up the court and get an open shot, but pass on it and go into our half-court set," he said. "We want to run more. And what we want to emphasize is: if you have an open look, take it. Shooting in transition will give us chances at offensive boards and second-chance points."