

## **A Century of Saxons Football, 1895 – 1995, at Alfred University**

**By R.J. Hydorn**

College football is a game of tradition. The NCAA keeps records as far back as 1889 when Amos Alonzo Stagg was an All-American at Yale. Even though the game has changed considerably since Stagg's day, tradition has remained its cornerstone. This year Alfred University honors one of its finest traditions by celebrating the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its first football team. AU will compete with 199 other Division III schools for the honor of playing for the national championship. The title game? It's named after Stagg. Times may have changed, but tradition has remained constant.

"It's important for the students at AU to have a football program," Saxons head coach Jim Moretti said. "There's nothing like a cool, crisp fall Saturday afternoon on Merrill Field. The game inspires pride and is an opportunity for all students on campus to learn about teamwork, cooperation and sportsmanship."

Those noble qualities were what inspired a group of AU students to form the school's first team in the fall of 1895. The Alfred "eleven" as the team was known then played three games against local teams from Wellsville and Bradford, losing all three to the bigger and rougher players on those squads. W.F. Goodwin Thatcher, a student enrolled at the University in 1895, recalled the origins of AU's first team in a 1951 letter. Thatcher admitted he was too small to play, but claimed to have a knowledge of the game from watching his cousin Wellington Lee, a player on the town team from Hornell, and passed along the rudiments of the game to the eager AU players. The first practice was held without equipment or even a football. When some of the older students got involved equipment was acquired from a mail-order house.

The team still needed a coach and Thatcher remembered the day George Hill arrived. "On one occasion an older man came over from Wellsville for a day or two to act as coach. He had actually played football and his contribution proved most valuable." The AU eleven fared much better in its second season under coach Leonard Winfield. AU won its first three games and tied its last two, producing shutout victories over Hornell, the Hornell YMCA and a scoreless tie with Wellsville.

Success was shortlived, however. Under the guidance of Walter Greene, a player on the inaugural team, AU didn't win a game in 1897 or '98.

The years leading up to World War I were marked by two trends. The first was AU began to gradually weed out games with local teams and play a more collegiate schedule. The other trend was the Saxons changed coaches virtually every year. From 1899 to 1914, Alfred had 12 different coaches who compiled a 31-41-8 record over that span.

E. R. Sweetland, an All-American at Cornell in 1899, took over the team in 1915 and coached it to a 4-2 season including a 13-7 victory over Syracuse University's freshman team. It has long been thought and listed in the all-time records as such that the victory was over the Syracuse varsity. Alfred's only attempt against Syracuse's regulars was in 1905, when the Saxons were on the wrong end of a 46-0 score.

With Sweetland at the helm AU won regularly, posting a 17-5-0 record during his four years as coach, including the school's first unbeaten and untied season in 1917. His replacement, Aloysius Wesbecher took over the team in 1920, but barely kept AU over .500 during his three-year reign. The rest of the 1920's were marred by poor teams. The

low point came in 1927 when the Saxons failed to score in any of their nine games. AU did win a game by forfeit, however, and the “scoreless wonders” made it into Ripley’s “Believe it or Not” for that distinction.

John Calloway assumed control of the team in 1930 and led AU to its first winning season in seven years. The team went 4-3-1 that year including a season-ending 66-0 loss to powerhouse Yale in the Yale Bowl. The 1930 season marked a first for Alfred, a night game. The idea for “nocturnal football” came from a graduate manager named Paul Orvis. Orvis assumed, quite correctly in hindsight, that more fans would come out to see a game on Saturday night than would attend a Friday afternoon contest. On Sep. 2, AU beat Clarkson 27-0 under the lights in what is considered to be the first night football game played in Western New York. Calloway went on to a 12-18-7 record in his five years as coach and was replaced in 1935 by John Cox, who won two games that season. Cox’s team went 0-5-1 in 1936.

The legendary Alex Yunevich came to Alfred in 1937 and promptly resurrected the football program with a 7-0-0 season. His 36-year reign was interrupted only by a stint in the navy from 1942-1946. AU didn’t field a team in those years because the men of Alfred were busy helping with the war effort.

Upon his return, AU picked up where it left off, by winning football games. The glory days of AU football came roughly from 1951-56. The Saxons went 38-42 during that stretch including three of Yunevich’s six unbeaten seasons. In 1955 and ’56, AU posted 8-0-0 and 7-0-0 records in back-to-back seasons behind the play of right end Chuck Shultz, who earned first team Little All-American honors for his efforts.

The next few years were lean ones for Yunevich and the Saxons, but that changed with an 18-16 victory over Susquehanna during the 1964 season which has been immortalized as the “Miracle at Merrill.” Susquehanna pounded AU 68-0 the season before and was looking to inflict similar damage that day. The Crusaders took a 8-0 lead, but the Saxons scored the next 18 points on a touchdown pass from Don Sagolla to Keith Gregory and a pair of running scores by Tom Quinn. Susquehanna’s John Vigone returned the kick after Quinn’s second score 85 yards to make the game 18-16, but it was all the Crusaders, ranked 8<sup>th</sup> in the nation by the Associated Press, could muster.

Yunevich and the Saxons received national attention in 1971 when Moretti, a native of nearby Hornell, led AU to an 8-0-0 season and first place in the Lambert Bowl voting for small schools. At the award ceremony held at the Touchdown Club in New York, Yunevich stood next to Joe Paterno of Penn State as the pair accepted the Lambert Trophy representing the best team in the East for both large and small schools. Moretti passed for 4,034 yards and 36 touchdowns during his career and took over head coaching duties from Sam Sanders in 1985.

Sanders replaced Yunevich after the 1976 season. Following a coach who accumulated a 177-85-12 record was no simple task, but Sanders held his own. His teams went 49-27-2 in his eight years at AU.

In 1981, Sanders led AU to a 10-0 regular season record and the school’s first-ever NCAA Division III playoff appearance. The Saxons lost a 13-12 heartbreaker to Montclair State in the opening round of the tournament.

Under Moretti, AU has gone 60-38-3, including ECAC North championships in 1986 and 89. The Saxons look to improve on their 6-3-1 performance from a year ago.

“To me, AU football tradition begins with Alex Yunevich. I’d like to think that Sam (Sanders) and myself have carried on that winning tradition,” Moretti said, “I talk a lot about tradition and Alex to my players. It gets carried down from the seniors to the new players as the torch gets passed year after year.”

Moretti added, “Tradition goes beyond the game on the field. Tradition comes from the alumni and community who have supported the teams from the beginning.”

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Note: The team continues today (2013) under the leadership and direction of coach Dave Murray.