

AU football team struggles through adversity, finishes season strong

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ALFRED The Alfred University football team's 2002 season was one of great ups and downs. It began with promise, bolstered by the return of 16 starters and depth at virtually every position. But after a tough opening-game loss to St. John Fisher, another setback at home to Ithaca and a win at St. Lawrence, the Saxons found themselves at 1-2 as they prepared for their Week 4 Homecoming matchup with Waynesburg. When that game ended, AU had not only lost the game, it had lost star tailback Jesse Raynor (Weedsport/Weedsport) for the season to a toe injury. At the time, Raynor was the Saxons' leading rusher and pass receiver and paced the team in scoring. A week later, starting fullback Brenton Brady (Rochester/Marshall) would be gone for the season due to illness. Suddenly the depth in the running game had disappeared. The Saxons rebounded the following week, holding host Union's offense without a touchdown in a 20-12 victory. After splitting the final four games, AU finished with a 4-6 record (1-3 Empire 8). Head coach Dave Murray and his staff were disappointed at not having won more games. He pointed to close losses at Hobart (25-19 in double overtime) and Grove City (12-7) that could very well have gone Alfred's way. But they were pleased with the way the Saxons persevered and finished the season strong. "Any time you lose a player of Jesse's caliber - our leading runner and receiver, our starting placekicker - it takes its toll, as it does when you lose a quality backup like Brenton," Murray said. "But the kids fought through a ton of adversity, a lot of injuries. They never quit. They fought hard every time." After Raynor and Brady were lost, third-string tailback Cory Raner (Locke/Moravia) stepped in and performed well, running for 262 yards and a pair of TDs over the final five games. The passing game, seen as the most inexperienced unit at the beginning of the season, flourished at times. Murray noted the performance of sophomore quarterback Ron Duliba (Forestville/Forestville), who saw his first real playing time this year. "There was a lot of pressure on a guy who hadn't played as a freshman," Murray said of Duliba, who would throw for 1,559 yards and rush for a team-high 465. "Over the second half of the season, Ronnie really developed. He played strong for us down the stretch. We'd been run-oriented, and found out we had some very talented receivers." Indeed, Alfred's receiving corps, a question mark in preseason, will begin 2003 as the deepest and best in Murray's five years as coach. Junior Nick Coleman (Waverly/Waverly) and sophomore Jake Sprague (Johnsonburg, PA/Johnsonburg), starters at wide receivers, caught 39 and 27 passes respectively. Freshman Horace Betts (Lyons/Lyons) had 22 receptions and sophomore Antonio Williams (Rochester/Hilton) had 14. Chris Sargent, a talented transfer from St. Lawrence, joins the team next year. Senior offensive linemen Steve Price (Syracuse/Henninger), Russ Myers (Ridgway, PA/Ridgway) and Larry Rossi (Hyde Park/F.D. Roosevelt) will be missed. Two linemen - junior guard Sean Gollnitz (Fredonia/Fredonia) and sophomore tackle Josh Skinner (Seneca Falls/Mynderse) return next season, with several solid youngsters waiting to take over starting roles. With continued improvement by Duliba and the return of the top four receivers and top two tight ends, the offense should be strong in 2003. Murray points to the potential return of Raynor (he plans to return for a fifth season if the NCAA grants him a hardship waiver) and Brady as further reason to be optimistic. "If we shore up those spots on the offensive line, we'll have the most explosive group of kids, especially at the skill positions, since I've been here," Murray said. Murray was happy with the effort put forth by the defense, but said the team's pass defense must improve if the team is to succeed in 2003. The Saxons played well against the run, allowing about 130 yards per game on the ground, but gave up nearly 200 yards passing each game. "We've got to play better pass defense," said Murray, who is hoping to recruit depth for the secondary, which returns three of four starters from this year's team, including two-year starting cornerback Vinnie Adamo (Fayetteville/Fayetteville-Manlius), strong safety Mark Smith (Corning/Corning West), the team's fourth-leading tackler with 51 stops, and free safety Mike Wright (Grand Valley, PA/Titusville), who finished with 48 tackles (fifth best on the team) and an interception. Cornerback Gabe Bouthillier (Bridgeport/Cicero-North Syracuse), the team leader in interceptions with three, is the only member of the defensive backfield that will be lost to graduation. Murray praised the play of his linebackers. Senior Will Till (Forestville/Forestville) led the team in tackles with 88 and classmate Colin Murphy (Manchester, NH/Central) was second with 77 despite missing the last two contests with a shoulder injury. Sophomore Joe Pereira (Rochester/Greece Athena), a starter this year, junior Erich Ely (Jordan/Jordan-Elbridge) and Mike Chambers, a transfer from St. Lawrence, will anchor the linebacking corps next year. The defensive line loses some talented veterans to graduation, including four-year letterwinners Pete Gaydon (Muncy, PA/Muncy), Dan Raynor (Bemus Point/Maple Grove) and Nick Luther (Westfield/Westfield), but returns solid contributors like sophomores Louie Pereira (Rochester/Greece Athena) and Nate Reid (Norwich/Norwich-Valley Forge) and junior Jeremy Batt (Gowanda/Gowanda). Murray was

pleased with the play of his special teams, which will return all of its key specialists in 2003. When Raynor went down, junior Pat Breuer (Penn Yan/Penn Yan) kicked well, and Duliba averaged nearly 35 yards per punt. The Saxons averaged more than 23 yards per kick return and almost 10 yards per punt return. Overall, Murray is pleased with the players set to come back and will recruit players on both sides of the ball. "We lose some experienced players, but we've got a lot of good players coming back," Murray said. "We'll recruit across the board and look to build depth throughout our defense."