

Youthful AU softball team experiences growing pains

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ALFRED The 2002 Alfred University softball team battled through various growing pains and difficult learning experiences as the young group struggled to adjust to each other and a new system. First-year head coach Jaime McLaughlin guided a Lady Saxon team that consisted of only four returning starters to a 5-26 overall record and a 2-11 Empire 8 conference record. "This was a new situation for everybody," stated McLaughlin. "The players had to learn my philosophy and I had to learn from them as well." The Lady Saxons opened their 2002 campaign with 16 consecutive losses before grabbing five wins over the remaining 15 contests. Alfred recorded two wins over Hilbert in early April, one win over Cazenovia in mid-April, and two wins over Hartwick to close out the regular season before bowing out of the Empire 8 conference tournament in the first round. "Wins and losses don't really show the accomplishments of this team," claimed McLaughlin. "We progressed the best that we could, and in the end we really came together as a team." McLaughlin's young team, which consisted of six freshman starters, is expected to lose only one player, senior shortstop Tara Harwood (Hornell/Hornell), to graduation. Harwood led the Lady Saxons with a .386 batting average and a .543 slugging percentage and finished tied for the team lead with a .400 on-base percentage. The Lady Saxon MVP also led the team in steals (15), hits (27), doubles (6), runs scored (15), and defensive assists (75). Harwood finished her softball career at Alfred as the school's all-time leader in games played (106), games started (106), homeruns (6), stolen bases (32), sacrifices (25) and assists (287). Although the loss of Harwood will certainly leave a significant void in the Lady Saxon lineup, McLaughlin is still set to return several quality players. Freshmen Co-Rookies of the Year, catcher Beth MacMichael (Scio/Scio) and leftfielder Rachel Porter (Almond/Alfred-Almond), are expected to only get better as time progresses. MacMichael batted .296 with five stolen bases and a team-high 14 RBIs, while Porter hit .246 in 31 starts and tied Harwood as the team's homerun leader with one. Other top players set to return to the Lady Saxon lineup include freshman third baseman Kristina Goldberg (South Salem/John Jay), who finished with a .263 batting average and six stolen bases, and sophomore centerfielder Jacque Krycia (Hamburg/Mt. Mercy), who hit .241 and was the recipient of the team's Unsung Hero award. Freshman Kathryn Lee (Winthrop, WA/Liberty Bell) is expected to return to first baseman next year after leading the team in putouts with 143. Freshman second baseman Andrea Crandall (Almond/Alfred-Almond) started 28 games and had 13 hits. McLaughlin also anticipates that her ace pitcher, junior Brandi Backus (Mt. Upton/Gilbertsville-Mt. Upton), will return in 2003 to lead the Lady Saxons from the mound. Backus finished the 2002 season with a 5-23 record over 161 2/3 innings of work, including 21 complete games in 28 starts. Backus posted a 4.16 ERA with 69 strikeouts, 96 walks, and one shutout. Despite forging through the struggles of a rebuilding year, McLaughlin still remains positive and optimistic about the future of her team. "I'm excited about this team," stated McLaughlin. "They have the heart and soul they need. The skills and togetherness will come with time."