

Saxon softball team set to compete for Empire 8 Conference crown, NCAA berth

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ALFRED, NY Gino Oliveri begins his eighth season as head coach of the Alfred University softball team with a solid mix of talented veterans and newcomers, optimistic about his team's chances of returning to the top of the Empire 8 Conference standings.

The Saxons, picked third in the Empire 8 preseason poll, are looking to repeat their success from 2010, when they shared the conference regular season crown and secured the program's first-ever NCAA tournament berth.

"I'm very excited about this team," said Oliveri, whose Saxons are coming off a 27-14 campaign in 2012 (7-5 Empire 8) and returns six starters from a season ago. "Their attitude and their work ethic have been just great. This group wants to taste (a return to the NCAA tournament) as much as I do."

Alfred's offense will have a mix of speed and power and Oliveri expects his defense to be strong. Junior designated player **Stephanie Arguello (Placentia, CA/Vista del Lago)** and sophomore centerfielder **Alyson Hampton (Oxnard, CA/Oxnard)** have outstanding speed that Oliveri hopes will wreak havoc on opposing defenses.

Arguello batted a team-best .463 with a .468 on-base percentage and 32 runs scored en route to earning National Fastpitch Coaches Association (NFCA) East Region Second Team honors and honorable mention from the Empire 8. A slap hitter with power, Arguello banged out a team-best three triples. Hampton batted .390 (.453 on-base percentage) and led the team in runs (35) and stolen bases (21 in 23 attempts). She had 15 RBIs and walked a team-leading 15 times.

"We'd like to have those two at the top of the order," Oliveri said. "They create so many problems for defenses because of their speed. It will be essential for them to get on, steal bases and take that extra base. I can do so much with them at the top of the lineup."

Other key returnees include senior second baseman **Maressa Mistretta (Shirley, NY/Longwood)**, senior utility player **Hana Gross (Union, NJ/Union)**, sophomore first baseman **Alison Wickwire (Towanda, PA/Towanda)**, junior outfielder **Rachel Guszick (Sparrowbush, NY/Port Jervis)** and junior utility player **Melissa Montano (West Covina, CA/Walnut)**.

Mistretta, outstanding on defense (.951 fielding percentage), was an NFCA Second Team East Region all-star and a First Team All-Empire 8 pick last year, when she hit .419 with 21 runs and 14 RBIs. Gross, who played catcher and third base, hit .289 with 22 RBIs and was second on the team with four homeruns, was a First Team Empire 8 all-star and gives the Saxon lineup flexibility, as she can also play first base. Guszick scored 21 runs and drove in 11 while spending most of her 23 starts in right field. Wickwire hit .272 with 22 RBIs and three homeruns and was tied for second on the team with 10 doubles.

“We’re expecting big things from (Mistretta),” Oliveri said. “She’s stellar with the glove and we expect her to get on base more and utilize her speed.”

Guszick is again expected to see most of her starts in right field. A .227 hitter a season ago, Olivieri said she has made great strides at the plate and he expects her to be more consistent in this, her third season. Gross, the only player remaining from the 2010 NCAA team, is invaluable because of her experience and her ability to play multiple positions in the field. Like Guszick, Olivieri expects her consistency with the bat to improve.

Wickwire, who saw most of her action at first base in 2012, will get more starts in the pitcher’s circle this year. “She’s one of our most powerful hitters,” Olivieri said of Wickwire.

Montano, who has seen time at second base and shortstop during her previous two years at AU, could see her utility role expanded to include time in the outfield. She played in 39 games (31 starts) and hit .273 (six doubles) with 14 runs and 10 RBIs in 2012.

“She can play anywhere in the outfield and may see some time at short,” Olivieri said. “She’s suffered some injuries the last two years, and just needs to stay healthy and get more consistent at the plate.”

A handful of new players will step right in and contribute, with as many as four taking on starting roles. Two freshmen shortstop **Nicole Maher (Newark, DE/Caravel Academy)** and third baseman **Dana Torchia (Pompton Plains/Pequannock Twp.)** could occupy the right side of the infield. Both are outstanding in the field and at the plate. Both are proven winners. Maher was a Delaware state all-star and NFCA all-region pick in high school, helping her team to four state finals appearances (two titles) and Torchia helped lead her team to a New Jersey state title her senior season in high school.

“Both are very smart, have great range and a very strong arm,” Olivieri commented. “Nicole is very aggressive with the bat and hits the ball hard. Dana is a very good hitter. She attacks the ball and hits it hard.”

Another newcomer who could step into the starting lineup is junior **Samijo Scheer (Corning, NY/Corning East)**, a junior college transfer who played two seasons at Tompkins Cortland Community College. A tremendous athlete, Scheer was a two-time JuCo All-American in softball and soccer at TCCC. Last fall, she started in goal for the AU soccer team. Listed on the roster as a utility player, Scheer can catch and play outfield or both corner infield positions and is a leading candidate to start in leftfield.

“At the plate, she’s strong, powerful and fast,” Olivieri said. “She needs to be more patient, and there will be an adjustment in transitioning from junior college to Division III and the Empire 8.”

Freshman **Jasmine Picini (Alexandra, VA/West Potomac)** will compete for the starting catcher’s job, but her versatility will allow Olivieri to use her in leftfield and at third base as well. “She has a very strong arm. And she has a really big bat...hits for a lot of power,” the coach commented.

Freshman **Nora Passuite (Lockport, NY/Lockport)** will compete for time at catcher as well. The left-handed hitter possesses “lots of power” and a strong arm, Olivieri said. “I anticipate her seeing time behind the plate.”

Freshman second baseman **Patricia Burdick (Lockport, NY/Lockport)** is solid defensive infielder who can hit, and Olivieri envisions her seeing meaningful playing time.

Returnees who will provide experience and add depth to the lineup include junior utility player **Jackie Tomisman (Schenectady, NY/Niskayuna)** and junior outfielder **Danielle Mastropierro (Randolph, NJ/Randolph)**. Tomisman saw action in 13 games (five starts at first base) and hit .381 with seven runs scored and eight driven in; Mastropierro was valuable as a pinch runner, appearing in 32 games and scoring 15 runs.

Other new players for the Saxons, all freshmen, include: first baseman **Julie Canova (Maspeth, NY/Mary Louis Academy)**, designated player/second baseman **Mackenzie Miller (Newport, OR/Newport)**, catcher/DP **Samantha Greenberg (Toms River, NY/Toms River)** and pitcher/second baseman **Samantha Jauregui (Lindsay, CA/Lindsay)**.

Canova could compete with Tomisman to spell Wickwire at first base when Wickwire is pitching. Greenberg is a good defensive catcher and line-drive hitter who will compete for time behind the plate. Jauregui, a speedy player who can hit, provides depth in the outfield and in the pitcher’s circle. Miller provides depth in the outfield and, because of her hitting, will also see at-bats as a designated player.

Olivieri is encouraged by the potential for his offense, which he hopes will develop more power than last year's squad, particularly in Empire 8 games, where runs come often at a premium. The 2012 Saxons had a team batting average of .361, but averaged just less than five runs in 12 E8 games. By contrast, the 2010 NCAA team hit .324, but averaged nearly six runs per conference contest.

"We have so much talent at the plate this year. Who plays, what lineup we use, will come down to production," Olivieri said. He agreed that with high on-base players at the top of the order, it will be imperative for the middle and bottom half of the order to drive in runs.

"Our offense will be versatile, and speed will be a big factor. We'll need to get our burners on the base paths, but then we'll have to get them home. We were more of a singles and doubles team last year, but I think we'll see power play more of a role in our offensive attack."

AU returns several members of a pitching staff that a season ago posted a team ERA of 3.50. Sophomore **Jessica O'Sullivan (Habersham, SC/Groton-Dunstable (MA) Regional)** went 10-6 to lead the team wins and shutouts (three). The lefty had a 3.04 ERA and a team-leading 82 strikeouts. Wickwire will be part of the starting rotation after showing significant improvement from her freshman year, when she appeared in seven games (five starts) and went 3-1 with a 4.57 earned run average.

"She threw very well in the fall," Olivieri said of Wickwire. "She's worked very hard on her changeup and has always had a good fastball. I expect bigger things from her in the circle this season."

The Saxons' other returning pitcher, sophomore **Samantha Jo Muller (Port Jervis, NY/Port Jervis)**, was effective as a reliever last season and will assume the role of closer this season. In 17 appearances (13 in relief) last year, she went 4-0 with a 3.65 ERA and a pair of saves. Muller, who hit .308 with four hits (one homerun) in 13 at-bats, could also see time in the outfield. Jauregui will be another option for Olivieri to use in relief.

Freshman **Katelyn Jakobsen (Elmwood Park, IL/Elmwood Park)** will solidify the pitching staff and has the potential to be the team's ace. "She has a great fastball, screwball and changeup. Her ball moves around a lot and has very good velocity," Olivieri noted.

Olivieri said pitching success and solid fielding will be paramount to the team's success.

"As always, it will come down to pitching and defense," Olivieri commented. "We're a young team (with just two seniors), but we have a lot of talent. We'll need our pitchers to keep us in games, and (on defense), if we enjoy the game, do what we do best, we'll make the plays. We have great depth; we're strong at every position."

AU opens its 2013 campaign with a 12-game preseason trip to Tuscon, AZ, March 11-16. The Saxons then play a 3 p.m. doubleheader on March 20 against visiting RIT on Alfred&s new on-campus field. The Saxons play their conference-opening doubleheader March 30 at Nazareth.