

## Saxons look to capitalize on deep offense, improve on inexperienced defense

8/13/03

ALFRED There's little doubt where the strength of the 2003 Alfred University football team lies. Eight starters return from an offense that averaged 302 yards per contest last season, including senior tailback Jesse Raynor (Weedsport/Weedsport), who returns for a fifth season and a chance to break most of the major school rushing records. Raynor was having a solid season in 2002 when he suffered a season-ending foot injury in the fourth game. He was granted a fifth season of eligibility and begins 2003 with 2,706 career rushing yards (800 behind AU all-time record holder Ray Rogers' 3,506). Already the holder of most school single-game rushing and scoring marks, he has a chance to set school career standards for touchdowns scored (total and rushing), pass receptions and 100-yard rushing games. "Jesse's done so much for our program," said sixth-year head coach Dave Murray. "Everyone thinks as a tailback he just carries the ball. But he's a tremendous receiver, special teams player and he's a great leader. When we lost him last year, it impacted us in so many areas and we struggled to overcome it. We're excited he's back." Raynor isn't Murray's sole offensive weapon. Junior quarterback Ron Duliba (Forestville/Foresville), with a year of starting experience under his belt, is poised to improve on a sophomore campaign in which he passed for 1,564 yards and nine touchdowns, but threw 13 interceptions. Murray said Duliba's confidence level has increased and he is poised to be more of a leader. "Ron went through some growing pains in his first year as a starter, but he learned a great deal and improved as the year went on," Murray commented. "We expect him to be a true field general this year. We expect him to make big plays in critical situations. He has to be a big part of our offensive package." Duliba will be helped by the return of the team's top two receivers from last year - senior Nick Coleman (Waverly/Waverly) and junior Jake Sprague (Johnsonburg, PA/Johnsonburg) - plus the addition of two talented transfers in junior Chris Sargent (Ogdensburg/Ogdensburg) and sophomore Tyquan Horton (Syracuse/Corcoran). Coleman caught 39 passes for 458 yards and three scores. Sprague added 27 catches for 383 yards and a touchdown. "Nick is a quiet leader who made a number of big plays for us last year," Murray said. "With his speed (Coleman runs sprint events for the AU track team) he'll be a valuable part of our offense. "Jake is a very intelligent receiver who understands his routes as well as anyone. He's a tremendous blocker and one of our fastest players." The arrival of Sargent, an all-league performer at St. Lawrence University in 2001, and Horton, who started one season at Division 1-AA Fordham University in 2000, will make a strong receiving corps even more potent. Sargent returns to the gridiron after sitting out last year following his transfer from St. Lawrence. In 2001, he was the Saints' leading receiver with 33 catches for 335 yards. Horton started eight games for Fordham in 2000. At 6-4 and with exceptional speed, Horton should provide an inviting target for Duliba. "Chris is like (Raynor and Coleman) in that he does a lot of things well," Murray said. "He's a solid receiver and special teams return man. We have great expectations of Chris." Tyquan has great size. He's a big kid who's loaded with potential. We think he'll fit into our offensive package well. With those two guys, and our returning receivers, defenses won't be able to focus on one or two guys." With tremendous receiving depth - Raynor and sophomore fullback Brenton Brady (Rochester/Marshall) are also talented pass catchers - Murray plans to place much of the offensive focus on the passing game. Despite the wealth of talented receivers, Alfred's bread and butter on offense will be its running game, with Raynor and Brady provide a powerful one-two punch out of the backfield. Raynor was averaging more than 100 yards per game rushing at the time of his injury last year, and despite missing almost seven games, still led the team in rushing touchdowns with five. Brady, who missed half the season due to illness, compiled 251 yards on the ground and at times showed flashes of brilliance. Murray doesn't rule out the possibility of moving Brady to the other side of the ball, where he would play one of the outside linebacking positions. Sophomore Chris Reger (Warsaw/Warsaw), a solid lead blocker and effective short yardage runner, will man the fullback position (mostly on short yardage situations) if Brady is moved to defense. Senior Pat Bell (Bow, NH/Bow) is the leading candidate at tight end. With a wealth of talent and depth at all skill positions, Murray expects a 50-50 run-pass split in plays. "I can see us putting three or four wideouts on the field," Murray said. "That will spread the (opponents') secondary and keep them from stacking the line of scrimmage to stop the run. Offensively, we have the personnel, the best overall group of skill players in the last five years." The biggest losses on offense from 2002 were felt by the offensive line, which graduated three of five starters, including four-year starting guard and 2002 Empire 8 Conference All-Star Steve Price. But Murray is encouraged by the return of senior guard Sean Gollnitz (Fredonia/Fredonia), a three-year starter, and junior tackle Josh Skinner (Seneca Falls/Mynderse), a two-year starter. "Those two guys are going to have to be leaders," Murray said of Gollnitz and Skinner. "They're big and strong and have a ton of

experience. We'll need them to bring the new guys along." Murray expects the offensive line to be filled out by sophomore Matt Nelson (Glens Falls/Glens Falls) at right tackle; senior Jordan Schmidt (Wheatfield/Niagara-Wheatfield) at left guard and sophomore Jim Hensel (Corning/Painted Post) at center. Key backups include sophomores Mike Jinks (Newark/Newark) and Adam MaCauley (Allegany/Allegany-Limestone) and freshman highly-touted freshman Mike Yokopovich (Webster/Webster). There are much larger holes to fill on the defensive side of the ball. Only four starters return from a squad that allowed 347 yards of offense per game (including 220 passing) in 2002. Key losses from last year's defense include the Saxons' top three tacklers (linebackers Will Till, Colin Murphy (an Empire 8 Conference All-Star) and Joe Pereira). Losses on the line included Nicholas Luther and Pete Gaydon (both all-conference selections last season) and backups Dan Raynor and Louie Pereira. Overall, only one of the top 10 in tackles from last season, senior linebacker Erich Ely (Jordan/Jordan-Elbridge), returns. Still, Murray is confident he has a solid front seven that will improve as the season progresses. Senior end Jeremy Batt (Gowanda/Gowanda) had three sacks last season. He'll play opposite junior Bill Battaglia (Cheektowaga/Cheektowaga), who was effective in a limited role last year. Senior Doug Mueller (Bainbridge/Bainbridge-Guilford) and junior Anthony Cotaggio (Glens Falls/Glens Falls) will start at tackle. Ely is the only returning linebacker who had significant playing time last year, when he notched 48 tackles. Sophomore Jamie Hebner (Stockton/Cassadaga Valley) has the inside track at the starting middle linebacker position. If Brady moves to linebacker, he'll likely man the weak side, with freshman Nick Gatto (Bemus Point/Maple Grove) and Andy Carroll (Lockport/Starpoint), competing for time on the strong side. The defensive backfield is relatively inexperienced. Only one holdover senior cornerback Vinnie Adamo (Fayetteville/Fayetteville-Manlius), returns from last season's starting secondary. Junior Ray Sawner (Sylvan Beach/Oneida) will be counted on to step in and contribute at cornerback as well. Two players with limited playing experience, juniors Kiel Liddell (Bemus Point/Maple Grove) and Joe Nigro (Seneca Falls/Mynderse) are leading candidates for the two safety positions. Both played primarily in nickel and dime situations in 2002. While he admits it is young and inexperienced, Murray is expecting big things from his defense. Given the inexperience of the secondary, the defense's effectiveness will depend heavily on the play of the front seven. "We're hoping for a group of defensive linemen and linebackers with a lot of speed," Murray said. "We need to get in the quarterback's face, make him rush his throws and keep the pressure off our secondary." AU is solid on special teams, where Sargent is expected to solidify the return game. He was the top kick and punt returner at St. Lawrence, averaging 9.3 yards per punt return and 16.7 yards per kickoff return. Raynor has been a solid kick return man throughout his career at Alfred and averaged 28.2 yards per return before suffering his injury last year. Brady averaged 25.2 yards per kick return in 2002. Coleman will likely see some time returning punts as well. Duliba averaged 34 yards per punt last season, dropping 13 kicks inside the 20-yard line. For placekicking duties, Murray will likely choose from between Raynor and senior Pat Breuer (Penn Yan/Penn Yan). Raynor, who possesses the stronger leg, began 2002 as the starting kicker and made three of five field goals before his injury. Breuer stepped in and converted four of five field goals and eight of 14 extra points. Murray identified several keys to the Saxons' success. He is counting on the offense to not only put up points, but also sustain long, time-consuming drives to keep a young defense off the field. He points to the need to limit big plays from opposing offenses and special teams and to minimize penalties and turnovers. Despite a challenging schedule that opens with road games against St. John Fisher College and Ithaca College, Murray is confident his team can contend for a spot in the postseason. "We need our players to come back in great shape and ready to play. We need a great preseason every one of our 25 practices are critical," he said. "We have some unproven, untested players. We hope we've surrounded them with enough talent and experience to bring them along and help us gel as a team."