

Deeper, more experienced Alfred University women's lacrosse team continues to build

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ALFRED, NY The Alfred University women's lacrosse team continues to add depth and experience as it looks to improve on last year's 1-10 record, which included a winless 0-7 mark in Empire 8 Conference play. Second-year head coach Samantha Valder, charged with rebuilding the program after it was temporarily discontinued during the 2006 season, sees signs that her team will make continued strides toward improvement, with the ultimate goal being the school's first-ever berth in the four-team Empire 8 Conference championship tournament. The Lady Saxons are still a young squad, with 11 sophomores and six freshman making up the roster. Despite its youth, there is a good amount of experience, as seven of 12 starters return. With the addition of 10 new players, the team now has greatly improved depth at attack, in the midfield, and on defense. The AU offense will have to improve significantly if the Lady Saxons are to succeed. The team managed only 47 goals in 11 games last season while giving up 144. While increased scoring is a priority, Valder said increasing possession time could be as important a factor. "We need to maintain control of the ball more in the offensive end," she said. "If we can limit turnovers, we will limit the other teams' (scoring) opportunities." Alfred has four talented attackers, two of them returnees from last year: sophomores Emily Tobin (Pittsford, NY/Pittsford) (eight goals and four assists in 2007) and Abbey Schaffnit (Bemus Point, NY/Maple Grove) (five goals, three assists) and freshmen Michelle Adams (Horseheads, NY/Horseheads) and Elyse Caldwell (Endwell, NY/Maine-Endwell). Each will see significant playing time and will be expected to score goals. "Emily and Abbey will be our leaders on the attack, something we really didn't have last year. They'll be expected to control the attack and score more goals, but we also want them to help the freshmen grow into their roles," Valder said. "(Adams) has a tremendous shot and could be our go-to player on offense. Elyse just has great stick skills. All four (attackers) will see extensive time." The midfield is solid, and includes the team's top two scorers from a year ago: sophomore captains Kate Simonds (Park City, UT/Park City) and Bailey Hebert (Heuvelton, NY/Heuvelton). Simonds led the team with 13 goals to go with two assists, while Hebert had eight goals and a team-leading four assists. "Kate and Bailey, as captains, will need to be leaders, for the midfield and the whole team," Valder said. "They need to run both ends of the field. I expect them to set up their scoring, but we also need them to play solid defense." Simonds and Hebert will be joined at midfield by sophomores Hannah Meier (Rochester, NY/Greece Odyssey) and Sara DeTine (Akron, NY/Akron), both first-year players, and freshmen Alysson Klopp (Derby, NY/Lake Shore), Ashley Denio (St. Mary's, PA/Elk County Christian), and Jennifer Omilanowicz (Mexico, NY/Mexico). DeTine and Omilanowicz are very good defensively and have shown continued improvement on offense. Klopp is one of the fastest players on the team, while Meier has developed into a solid defensive player. Denio, who Valder said possesses the hardest shot, is continuing to make strides on improving her defense. All five new midfielders will be counted on to provide significant minutes. "We had no depth at midfield last year and now we do. We'll be able to run people in and out and give our midfielders some breathers," Valder said. "It's huge for Kate and Bailey to have that year's experience under their belts, and we have new players who will be able to take on some of the scoring load. Last year, everything seemed to be on Kate's, Bailey's and Emily's shoulders." The AU defense has improved depth as well. Returning starters include sophomore Lisa Button (Troupsburg, NY/Jasper-Troupsburg), the team's lone Empire 8 all-star (honorable mention) last year after picking up 31 groundballs and causing 16 turnovers, and classmates Emily Steen (South Pasadena, CA/Purnell School) (team highs in groundballs with 36 and caused turnovers with 18) and Amanda Sullivan (Lexington, MA/Lexington) (19 groundballs). "Lisa and Amanda are vocal leaders who will be running our defense," said Valder, noting that Button's improved stick skills could make her a factor on offense as well. "We'll use (Steen) a lot on double teams to try to force turnovers. She just has a great mind for defense." A pair of first-year players, sophomores Meghann Hudson (Jamesville, NY/Fayetteville-Manlius) and sophomore Amanda Empey (Bloomfield, NY/Bloomfield), will provide depth on defense. Freshman Kate Baughman (Rush, NY/Rush-Henrietta) is the lone goalie on the roster, and Valder expects her to make a difference. "She's a tough, fundamentally sound goalie. She's not afraid to step out of the goal and go after the ball," Valder said. "She has excellent stick skills and is effective at getting the ball cleared." Overall, Valder is pleased with how her defense is shaped up. "Speed-wise, we'll be a lot quicker, and we have the vocal leadership that was missing last year." Valder's expectations for the team are tempered by the realization that there are no upperclassmen on the roster. Still, she fully expects the team to improve as it goes through its growing pains and seeks to become a factor in the competitive Empire 8 Conference. "I'm extremely excited for this season. Even though we are young, our talent level is much stronger than last year," Valder commented. "Our goal is to be competitive in

every game we play."