

## Alfred University softball team aiming for Empire 8 crown

2/20/09



ALFRED, NY A deep and talented 2009 Alfred University softball team, with a solid mix of veterans and newcomers, is aiming for an Empire 8 Conference title and the school's first-ever NCAA championship appearance. "Our goal, as always, is to get into the conference tournament, win it and go to the NCAAs," said fourth-year head coach Gino Olivieri, referring to the four-team conference championship tournament, the winner of which earns the Empire 8's automatic bid to the NCAA Division III championships. Under Olivieri's guidance, AU has made the conference tournament twice in his first year (2006), when the Lady Saxons dropped their first two games in the double-elimination tournament; and again last season, when AU, seeded second, beat fourth-seeded Nazareth and lost twice to the eventual tournament winner, third-seeded St. John Fisher. Olivieri has coached the team to consecutive single-season records for wins, including last year, when AU went 24-13 (8-4 Empire 8). Alfred's career leader in coaching wins, he has also led the Saxons to the Eastern College Athletic Conference (ECAC) Upstate tournament the last two seasons, where AU lost in the title games both years. He said his team, which has but two seniors, has its eyes set on a bigger prize. "They've been to the (Empire 8) tournament, and they've had a taste of the ECACs two years running. They're not satisfied," Olivieri said. Olivieri's is working with the deepest and most experienced roster he's had in his tenure at AU. Nine of 10 starters return from 2008, including six Empire 8 all-stars and the team's top four hitters and run producers. Hitting shouldn't be a problem for the Saxons, who last season set school records for team batting (.335) and team slugging (.465) while scoring 213 runs (second most in a season in school history). Among the top returning hitters is sophomore first baseman Ashley Passaro (Long Beach, NY/Long Beach). As a freshman, Passaro led the team in hitting (.457) and set new AU single-season record for hits (48) and RBIs (34). Her seven doubles and .581 slugging percentage ranked second on the team and she was named a First Team Empire 8 and ECAC Upstate all-star. Other key returnees are junior second baseman Karen Folts (Penn Yan, NY/Penn Yan), junior third baseman Jesika LeBarron (Campbell, NY/Corning West) and junior centerfielder Jessica Figallo (Ridgewood, NJ/Ridgewood). Folts, who moves to second from shortstop to make way for junior college transfer Samantha Rollins (Hornell, NY/Hornell), has wielded a steady bat throughout her two seasons at AU. Last year, she batted .367 with 26 runs scored and 26 driven in and slugged .560 in en route to earning First Team Empire 8 honors. LeBarron, the AU career leader in homeruns, hit .381 in 2008 (.551 slugging) with 20 runs and 18 RBIs. Figallo batted .363 with 26 runs and 18 RBIs. She led the team with a .647 slugging percentage and belted a school single-season record seven homeruns. LeBarron and Figallo were Second Team Empire 8 and NFCA Northeast Region Third Team all-stars. The addition of Rollins, a junior, only makes the AU offense more powerful. A two-time junior college All-American at Monroe Community College in Rochester, NY, Rollins batted .577 for MCC as a senior last year, when she led the nation in RBIs with 105 and hits with 113 and was named Louisville Slugger National Junior College Division III Player of the Year. In two years at MCC, she batted .526 with 210 hits, 208 RBIs and 138 runs scored. Other returning starters are junior leftfielder Shannon Mather (Endicott, NY/Union-Endicott), junior utility players Jordan Siefer (Sylvania, OH/Sylvania Southview) and Lauren Peterson (Abington, MD/Harford Tech) and senior catcher Nicole Messura (Albion, NY/Albion). Peterson, who saw time in right field and at catcher, and Messura, now in her fourth year as the team's starting backstop, each earned Second Team Empire 8 honors a season ago. Peterson drove in 16 runs and hit three homeruns and Messura posted a .977 fielding percentage. Mather, a speedy left-handed hitter, batted

.318 with 12 RBIs and 15 runs scored, while Siefer batted .292 and led the team with 29 runs and eight stolen bases. Her 29 runs tied the school single-season record she set as a freshman in 2007. Other key returnees from a season ago include sophomores Madison Snyder (Medford, NY/Patchogue-Medford) and Brittany Loucks (Addison, NY/Addison). Snyder, a utility player who saw time at third base and in the outfield her freshman year, had seven hits with three runs and a pair of RBIs in limited time at the plate last season. Loucks batted .314 (16-for-51) with eight runs scored and 10 driven in. "One through nine we can really hit the ball," Olivieri commented. "And we have four or five more who can hit, too." The Saxons' defense will be strong. Olivieri said Folts' move to second has been seamless and she is working well with Rollins. "It's like they've been playing together for years," he said. LeBarron is a solid third baseman and Olivieri expects her defense will get even better now that she'll be playing exclusively at third. LeBarron was the Saxons' number two pitcher last season, going 8-1 with a 1.82 ERA. "I expect great things from her now that she can really focus on playing the field," Olivieri said. Passaro was outstanding at the other corner infield position last year, making only two errors and turning in a .991 fielding percentage. Messura has been reliable behind the plate and will be counted on to guide a young, inexperienced pitching staff. The outfield is solid defensively as well, with speed in left (Mather) and center (Figallo). Siefer, Peterson, Snyder and Loucks will be competing for time in right field and also as designated players. Siefer, a second baseman her first two seasons, possesses good speed, and Peterson was solid in right a year ago, leading the team with five outfield assists. Senior Caitlin Bangs (Ithaca, NY/Ithaca) returns to the team after taking last season off while studying abroad. She is a solid backup at second base and in the outfield and will be used primarily as a pinch runner. "Defensively, we don't have a weak spot," Olivieri said. "If there was an injury, we have the depth to be able to have someone step right in." The Saxons roster has 10 newcomers, in addition to Rollins. Freshman catcher Emily Fenton (Thorofare, NJ/West Deptford) will compete for time behind the plate, as will freshmen utility players Angela Netta (Rahway, NJ/Mother Seton Regional) and Bridgett Henry (Hamburg, NY/Frontier). Henry can also play third base, while Netta can play second base and in the outfield. Sophomore Shanna Ewoldt (Tuscon, AZ/Waubansie Valley) is a utility player who is primarily a third baseman. "We have some very good freshman hitters," Olivieri said, noting that each will have a chance to earn playing time. "The bottom line is, whoever hits is going to play." Among the team's nine freshmen, six are pitchers who Olivieri is counting on to step in and contribute right away. Last year's number one, junior Holly Seidewand is studying abroad and is not playing this spring. Olivieri said each pitcher brings something different to the table. Sarah Scanlon (Mishawaka, IN/Mishawaka) and Claire Bennett (Mumford, NY/Caledonia-Mumford) are power pitchers with good changeups; Nicole Hedrick (Albany, NY/Catholic Central) and Molly Shepherd (Camillus, NY/West Genesee) have solid changeups and use all parts of the plate; and Chelsey Cary (Corfu, NY/Pembroke) and Lydia de Martino (Millington, NJ/Wachtung Hills) have excellent movement and change speeds well. Hedrick and Shepherd are utility players who will also provide depth at shortstop and in the outfield, respectively. Olivieri said he's unsure who will step up and solidify spots in the rotation and who will wind up helping more in a relief role. He expects that will work itself out during the Saxons 12-game trip to Cocoa Beach, FL, March 8-14. "Right now, I don't have a number one, two, three or four. I have a pitching staff that needs to prove itself," he said. "A lot of it will unfold in Florida." Olivieri said the team has worked hard at eliminating the mental mistakes with defense and baserunning that has hurt them in the past. The Saxons have improved greatly in that area, as well as in sacrificing and stealing bases. The greatest unknown will be on the pitcher's mound, as was the case the last two seasons. In 2008, AU was without its top pitcher from the previous season and Seidewand and LeBarron stepped in and performed well. "Losing two pitchers in two years, both of whom had experience in big-time games, was tough," Olivieri said. "We're starting from scratch against, but I think we're going to be OK."