

## AU ready to make run at Empire 8 football crown

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ALFRED, NY -- What started out as a perceived strength for the Alfred University football team in 2012 the Saxons' running game took several big hits throughout the season, as a group of talented running backs fell to injury throughout the season.

First, senior tailback **Tyler DeRosa (Miller Place, NY/Miller Place)** -- expected to provide a devastating one-two punch with junior tailback **Austin Dwyer (Hornell, NY/Hornell)** was lost for the season with an injury suffered in the first half of a Week 3 win at Buffalo State. With DeRosa out of the lineup, junior fullback **Chuck Beckwith (Victor, NY/Victor)** ran for 177 yards against Buff State and wound up rushing for 554 and 10 TDs on the year en route to earning First Team Empire 8 all-conference honors.

But injuries continued to play havoc with the Saxon ground game, as both Dwyer and Beckwith would go down with season-ending injuries in a Week Seven loss at Utica. AU would go on to finish 6-4 overall, with a 5-2 Empire 8 Conference mark placing the Saxons second in the league standings.

Rushing will again be paramount to the Saxons' success in 2013, especially with four of five starting offensive linemen set to return. Dwyer, a two-time former Empire 8 Conference all-star (2010, 2011) and the league's Rookie of the Year in 2010; DeRosa, who ran for over 600 yards in 2011 after transferring to AU from Western Connecticut, and was granted medical redshirt after last year's injury; and Beckwith are all recovered from their injuries and set to return, again giving AU depth and experience at the running back position.

"Undoubtedly, the strength of our offense, and our football team, will be our tailbacks," said head coach Dave Murray. "All three are outstanding football players who give us great leadership and experience."

AU ran for 1,836 yards in 10 games last season, with the aforementioned trio gaining 1,028. Add in the 395 yards gained by sophomore wide receiver **Maleke Fuentes (Olean, NY/Olean)** the Empire 8 Rookie of the Year who got most of his rushing yards out of the Wildcat set implemented after the Utica game and nearly all of the Saxons' rushing production will return this fall.

Murray plans to use Fuentes more as a receiver, noting that most his rushing yards last year came after injuries to the Saxons' tailbacks. "He may be a factor in the Wildcat formation, but right now it's important to use him primarily as a wide receiver," Murray commented.

Murray said Dwyer, DeRosa and Beckwith each accomplished at running and catching the ball will all contribute to the Saxons' offense, and he envisions times when two of that trio will be on the field at the same time. "We've experimented with sets that would allow us to use two tailbacks simultaneously. We need to find a way to get all three involved," he said.

Senior **Dave Jennings (Attica, NY/Attica)** is the incumbent starter at fullback. He slid into that role when Beckwith, who began the 2012 season as the starting fullback, moved to tailback following DeRosa's injury. "He (Jennings) will be a big part of the success of our run game because of his ability to block; that's his strength," Murray said. Senior **Colden Knapp (King's Ferry, NY/Lansing)** will back Jennings up at fullback.

AU welcomes a new starting quarterback as the Saxons look to improve a passing game that produced just 158.2 yards per contest last season. Competing for the job will be freshmen **Dominic Scavo (Hornell, NY/Hornell)**, a transfer from Ithaca, and **Tyler Johnson (East Syracuse, NY/East Syracuse-Minoa)**, a transfer from Division II American International, and senior **Joe Enslin (Blairstown, NY/Belvidere)**, who started the final three games for Alfred in 2012.

"We had a really good battle this spring between (Enslin) and the two transfers (Scavo and Johnson), Murray said.

Scavo led nearby Hornell High School to three straight New York State Class B championships (2009-11), and his teams were unbeaten for each of his three seasons as the Red Raiders' starting QB. He was a two-time First Team Class B all-state selection, earning Class B Player of the Year honors as a senior in 2011. Scavo didn't play a down for Ithaca before transferring to AU this spring. Johnson was a Second Team New York State Class A all-star and Central New York Co-Player of the Year as a senior in 2011, when he led East Syracuse-Minoa to the third of its three straight Section III Class A championships. Enslin threw for 592 yards with four touchdowns and a pair of interceptions.

Freshman **Ryan McDonnell (Ballston Lake, NY/Burnt Hills-Ballston Lake)**, an all-state kicker and punter his senior year of high school in 2012, will also look to compete for time at quarterback.

Whoever earns the starting QB nod will be throwing to some talented receivers. While standout tight end Adam Schutz (team-leading 39 catches and four TD receptions) was lost to graduation, six of the team's top receivers from last year return. They include Fuentes and senior wideouts **Josh Phillips (Syracuse, NY/West Genesee)** and **Jonathan Ruffin (Copiague, NY/Copiague)**. Fuentes had 35 catches for a team-leading 427 receiving yards, with two TDs, while Phillips, a starter since his freshman year, caught 27 passes for 346 yards and a touchdown. Ruffin, a converted

quarterback, played in all 10 games as a third wideout and caught 11 passes for 174 yards and a pair of scores.

“Phillips is the leader of our receiving corps. He has terrific hands and runs excellent routes we really need him to have a great senior year,” Murray said. “Fuentes is dynamic with the ball in his hands and will get big chunks of yards after the catch. Ruffin has steadily improved every year he’s been here and has the capability to make big plays.”

Freshman **Brendan Buisch (Hornell, NY/Hornell)**, a First Team Class C New York State all-star as a senior in 2012, is among the newcomers, and seniors **Adam Brien (Victor, NY/Victor)** and **David Lee Tack (Newark, NY/Newark)** are among a group of returnees competing for time at wide receiver.

Senior **Alec Ladonis (Nescopeck, PA/Berwick)**, who played in nine games and caught four passes for 58 yards, is set to take over for Schutz at tight end.

“His strength is his blocking. He has good hands, but he’s really an outstanding blocker,” Murray said of Ladonis.

Further strengthening the Saxons’ passing game will be the play of Dwyer, DeRosa and Beckwith, who are solid catching the ball out of the backfield. Dwyer had seven catches for 40 yards in 2012 and for his career has 55 catches for 368 yards. Beckwith caught six passes for 47 yards and a score and DeRosa had six receptions for 88 yards and a TD in 2011.

The Saxons’ offensive line will be a strength, in terms of talent and experience, with four or five starters returning from a season ago. The unit is led by senior left tackle **Ryan DiFlavio (West Seneca, NY/West Seneca West)**, a starter each of his first three seasons who earned Empire 8 all-conference honors the last two (First Team last fall; Second Team in 2011). Senior center **Zach Harrington (Rochester, NY/Greece Olympia)** earned Empire 8 honorable mention in 2012, his first season as a starter.

Other first-string linemen returning from last year are junior guard **Kyle Woodard (Dundee, NY/Dundee)** and senior guard **Pat Teta (Avon, NY/Avon)**.

Teta is the leading candidate to start at left guard, while Woodard is expected to battle junior **Dalton Maska (Lockport, NY/Starpont)** for the starting right guard spot. Sophomore **Kevin Lamarque (Holliston, MA/Holliston)**, who transferred to AU from Division II Merrimack University, is a leading candidate to fill the starting right tackle spot. The 6-2, 335-pound Lamarque was a two-time Tri-Valley League all-star in high school, helping his Holliston High team to a Massachusetts state championship in 2010.

Among the returning linemen who saw some action last season looking for greater roles are senior **Vincent Tesoriero (Clay, NY/Liverpool)** and sophomore **Trey Beltrand (Central Islip, NY/Central Islip)**. “There’s a lot of seniority in this group,” Murray said of his talented and experienced offensive line. “This is a very seasoned group, which is

good because we are going to have a new starting quarterback. And it will make our strength our running backs even better.”

The Saxon defense was hit much harder by graduation and will be replacing eight of 11 starters this fall, including a quartet of First Team Empire 8 all-stars in All-American tackle Mike Raplee, end Chris Steeves, free safety Jon Jackson and strong safety Reggie Pressley. Still, some strong defenders return, as do a host of talented backups ready to step into greater roles.

“Even though we lost some quality players to graduation, this is as good a group of talented youngsters we’ve had here in a while,” Murray commented.

The line will be led by its lone returning starter, senior end **Justin Collen (Averill Park, NY/Averill Park)**, who in 2012, his first season as a first-stringer, had 24 tackles, including seven for loss and 2.5 sacks. “He’ll be the cornerstone of our line. He has gotten bigger and stronger and better every year,” Murray said of Collen. “We expect him to have a dominant season.”

Linemen competing for time include senior ends **Fred Langenstein (Pittsford, NY/Pittsford)**, **Cameron Apt (Rochester, NY/Pittsford-Mendon)** and **Andrew Wascher (Greenhurst, NY/Maple Grove)**; senior tackle **Matt DeVaul (Endicott, NY/Maine-Endwell)**, junior tackle **Keith Carrington (Queens Village, NY/St. Francis)**, and sophomore tackle **Zach Brinkley (Brockway, PA/Brockway)**.

Murray said that depending on the play of his lineman in preseason, the Saxons could run a 4-3 or 3-4 defensive scheme, or both. The team has abundant depth and talent at linebacker, which would allow him the flexibility to use either base defense.

Two starting linebackers from last year Brendan McGinnins and J.R. Britton will be replaced this season, with senior outside linebacker **D.J. Welch (Avon, NY/Avon)** the lone holdover. Welch was third on the team in tackles with 67 (4.5 for loss, one sack) and also had an interception and two fumble recoveries.

Candidates to start at linebacker this year include junior outsider linebackers **Davis Turner (South Glens Falls, NY/South Glens Falls)** and **Justin Liberta (Hamburg, NY/Frontier)**, junior inside linebacker **Zach Wiley (Marcellus, NY/Marcellus)**, sophomore inside linebacker **Corry Wallace (Mastic Beach, NY/Longwood)**, sophomore outside linebacker **Peter Diak (West Henrietta, NY/Rush-Henrietta)** and freshman inside linebacker **Zach Bacon (Hornell, NY/Hornell)**.

Turner was a backup at outside linebacker last fall and had 20 tackles, while Wiley, the backup middle linebacker, had 17 tackles and an interception. Liberta, a backup to Welch at the weakside spot last year, had 10 tackles (one for loss).

Wallace and Diak played on the junior varsity last season; Murray said both will compete for spots on the two-deep, if not the starting lineup. Bacon was a two-time New York State First Team all-star, earning Class B honors as a linebacker in 2011 and Class C honors as a running back in 2012.

“We have a lot of depth at the linebacker position, regardless of whether we go 4-3 or 3-4,” Murray said. “This is a very talented group.”

Three starters in the defensive backfield were lost to graduation: three-year starter Pressley and two-year starter Jackson, along with cornerback Andy Ruddock. Despite those losses, Murray said “this has the potential to be one of the strongest secondaries we’ve had here in a long time.”

The lone holdover from the first unit will be junior cornerback **Michael Perkins (Rochester, NY/East)**, who had 39 tackles (23 solo) and was second on the team in interceptions (three) while leading with 10 pass breakups. “He had a very good year for us his first season as a starter and we expect him to compete for all-conference honors this year,” Murray said of Perkins.

The Saxons also welcome the return of sophomore cornerback **Michael Berardi (Wellsville, NY/Wellsville)**, who saw significant time last fall in passing downs, and senior safety **Seiji Hinton (Freeport, NY/Freeport)**, a reliable backup each of the last two seasons who started a pair of games last fall when Pressley was injured.

Berardi had 18 tackles to go with an interception and a forced fumble; Hinton had seven tackles (four solo). Both will challenge for starting jobs this season. “He had a really good freshman year as our nickel back. He has the ability to step in and be a starter for us this year,” Murray said of Berardi.

Hinton, a solid tackler with good coverage skills, is expected to start at strong safety. “He had a great spring for us. He has been solid for us with limited playing time.” Murray said.

Sophomore **Calvin Bain (Rochester, NY/East)**, a transfer from Division I FCS St. Francis (PA) University, is the leading candidate to start at free safety. Bain played in nine games as a freshman defensive back at St. Francis in 2011, finishing with 28 tackles, two interceptions, three pass breakups and a fumble recovery. “He’s an outstanding athlete,” Murray said of Bain. “He has terrific speed and is a great cover guy.”

Murray said with the quality of players he has coming back, and the new players coming in, the drop-off on defense from last year to this won’t be significant. “We are a little inexperienced, but we have a lot of talent and the potential to be very good. We have a number of players who are battle-tested and several who have seen significant time as backups. We’re not nearly as green as we may look on a piece of paper.”

Special teams could be a strength, as the Saxons' top kickoff and punt return men are back. Fuentes, who earned Empire 8 First Team honors as an all-purpose runner, averaged 23.3 yards on kickoff returns, and Ruffin returned seven punts for a 10.6 yard average. Dwyer, a top return man his first two years, averaged 18.5 yards on six kickoff returns in 2012. Murray said DeRosa, Dwyer, Fuentes, Bain and Berardi could all see time returning kicks. Ruffin and Fuentes are leading candidates to return punts.

McDonnell a First Team New York State Class A all-star as a placekicker/punter in 2012, could add a boost to a Saxons' kicking game. The frontrunner for the starting punter's job, McDonnell will compete for placekicking duties with senior **Zach Tavalaro (Manlius, NY/Fayetteville-Manlius)**, made 21 of 26 extra point attempts last fall.

"We need a lot of improvement on special teams from a year ago, in terms of our kicking game, our return game, and our kick coverage," Murray said. "If you have a solid run game and special teams play, you'll win a lot of games. We know we have a solid run game, so we will be putting a lot of emphasis on special teams this fall."

The goal for the Saxons is to win the Empire 8 title and earn the conference's automatic bid to the NCAA championships. AU begins its season with three non-league games -- home against RPI Sept. 14 and Montclair State Sept. 21 and at Brockport State Sept. 28 before beginning its seven-game Empire 8 slate. AU is at home against Buff State (Oct. 5), Hartwick (Oct. 19), Salisbury (Nov. 2) and Utica (Nov. 9); and on the road against Ithaca (Oct. 12), Frostburg (Oct. 26) and St. John Fisher (Nov. 16).

Murray is confident the Saxons can compete for a league crown this year.

"If we can run the football effectively and be a real quality special teams group, we have a chance to be successful," he said. "We need our returning starters to be leaders and carry us early in the season, and we need our new starters to step up and be playmakers on game day."