

AU softball team ready to build on success of 2005

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ALFRED, NY The Alfred University softball team approaches the start of the 2006 season with a new coach, several new players and an eye on the school's first-ever berth in the Empire 8 Conference championship tournament. While the team's numbers are down 12 players make up this year's roster there are several returnees from last year's team, which went 16-14. The 16 wins in 2005 tied an AU single-season record. First-year head coach Gino Olivieri is confident his squad can improve on its 4-8 Empire 8 Conference record from a season ago and be among the four teams competing in the conference championship tournament. The tournament winner earns an automatic bid to the NCAA Division III championships. "That's our goal right now, to make the Empire 8 playoffs," he said. "We only have 12 players, but if we stick together, we'll have success." Several key returnees from last year's team grace the Lady Saxon lineup, including senior pitcher Brittany Curran (Alfred, NY/Alfred-Almond). Curran, already the school record holder for career wins (25), strikeouts (255) and shutouts (five), last year set new AU single-season marks for strikeouts (122) and shutouts (three) and in a game vs. Simmons College, struck out a school-record 12 batters. She finished the 2005 season with a 12-9 record and 2.55 ERA. "We're going to count on Brittany to continue her success on the mound," Olivieri said. "She's done a solid job her entire career here and we expect big things from her this season." Curran, who had 15 hits last season (including the team's only homerun) and scored eight runs, will have a new battery mate this season, as last year's starting catcher, junior Gretchen Weidner (Eden, NY/Eden), is studying abroad this spring. While the Saxons will miss her defense and bat (Weidner had a .994 fielding percentage while hitting .282 with 12 RBIs in 2005), Olivieri is excited about the arrival of freshman Nicole Messura (Albion, NY/Albion). "She (Messura) is a solid defensive catcher with a very good arm and has a good bat," Olivieri said. "I'm very excited about our battery of Brittany and Nicole." Alfred has some talented hitters returning to the lineup, most notably junior third baseman Lauren Mastin (Springwater, NY/Wayland-Cohocton). Mastin, an academic All-American as a sophomore, was the Lady Saxons' most dangerous hitter in 2005. She batted .344 and led the team in hits (32), RBIs (20), runs (16) and slugging (.570). Her five triples tied a school single-season record. "Lauren will be strong for us at the plate and in the field," Olivieri said, adding that Mastin may wind up moving to shortstop. Other top returnees include senior centerfielder Heidi Brooks (Wayland, NY/Wayland-Cohocton). In her first year at AU after transferring from Corning Community College, where she was a two-time junior college All-American, Brooks hit a team-leading .350 with 10 RBIs, 10 runs scored and a .517 slugging percentage. "With her swing and play in the outfield, Heidi will be a big weapon for us," Olivieri commented. Senior Emilie Vicchio (Shaker Heights, OH/Shaker Heights) returns to first base, where she logged a .979 fielding percentage in 2005. Vicchio was a solid contributor on offense as well, hitting .274 with 23 hits and 14 runs (both second on the team). Senior Adrienne Egglinger (Amityville, NY/Amityville Memorial) saw action in 14 games last season, mostly as a designated hitter, and had eight hits. She will see time in the outfield and infield this year. Also returning this season are senior outfielder Catherine Rieck (Walworth, NY/Gananda) and sophomore pitcher-outfielder Amanda McMinn (Ridgway, PA/Ridgway). They saw limited action in 2005, with McMinn getting one hit (a double) in two at-bats and Rieck seeing action in the outfield in eight games (four starts). In addition to Messura, several other newcomers will be counted on to contribute right away. Senior Samantha Salmon (Hornell, NY/Avoca), a former AU women's basketball player in her first season on the softball team, could start at second base. Junior Andrea Sarro (Long Island City, NY/Washington Irving) is a first-year player who could take over the third base spot if Mastin moves to short. Junior Amy Plank (Hornell, NY/Hornell), a transfer from Alfred State College and a member of the AU women's basketball team, will compete for time at first base, while freshman Katelyn Dermondy (Bergen, NY/Byron-Bergen) will look to see time at second base and in the outfield. Olivieri said that while there is not a lot of power in the Lady Saxon lineup, there are good hitters. His goal is to get his players to be patient at the plate, get on base and look for players like Mastin, Brooks and Curran to drive them in. Combining a timely, opportune offense with stingy defense and pitching will be the key to AU winning ballgames. "If we're solid defensively and can keep ourselves in games, we'll have a very good chance of being in every contest," Olivieri said. "We need to keep mental mistakes to a minimum, improve our patience at the plate and get key hits when we need them." He added, "I'm really excited to be here and look forward to working with the girls and seeing this team improve."