

AU softball team aims for conference crown

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ALFRED, NY The Alfred University softball team has reached new heights in each of Gino Olivieri's four seasons as head coach and hope to achieve a new milestone in 2010: the program's first-ever trip to the NCAA Division III championships. The Saxons earned the team's first Empire 8 Conference championship berth in 2006, Olivier's first year at the helm, and set new school records for wins in a season each of the last three years. This year, with Olivieri's first recruiting class now seniors, AU will try win the Empire 8 tournament and the conference's automatic bid to the NCAAs. An experienced and talented squad gives the Saxons a solid opportunity to attain that goal. "We won (a school single-season record) 27 games last year. Our seniors have been to the ECAC championships the last three years and the Empire 8 tournament the last two," Olivieri commented. "We're not happy with that. Our goal is to get into the NCAAs championships." AU has veteran leadership and experience, with six returning starters (five of them conference all-stars a season ago), its two top pitchers from 2009, and some valuable reserves ready to play a greater role in 2010. This year's Saxons will be led by a pair of record-setting seniors in second baseman Karen Folts (Penn Yan, NY/Penn Yan) and third baseman Jesika LeBarron (Campbell, NY/Corning West). Folts was named Empire 8 Co-Player of the Year in 2009 after setting a new school single-season record for home runs (11), while LeBarron earned First Team ECAC and NFCA Northeast region honors after establishing new school single-season marks for RBIs (54), hits (55) and runs (32). Folts (.420 average, 31 runs, 40 RBIs, Second Team NFCA regional all-star) and LeBarron (.440, nine homeruns, Empire 8 Second Team) provide pop in the middle of the order and can get on base. They'll be surrounded by a host of talented hitters, including senior outfielder Shannon Mather (Endicott, NY/Union-Endicott) (.333, 14 runs), and sophomore utility player Molly Shepherd (Camillus, NY/West Genesee) (Empire 8 honorable mention, .260, 14 runs, 17 RBIs). All four are solid fielders. Shepherd played first base most of the 2009 season but is expected to see time in centerfield this year. LeBarron, third in the order, hits for power but can also get on base (.452 on-base percentage last year) and score runs. On defense, "she's improved every year, becoming more and more confident. She's a vacuum over there at third," Olivieri said. Folts (.458 on-base mark in 2009), who will begin the season batting fifth, should see a lot of good pitches batting behind LeBarron and junior first baseman Ashley Passaro (Long Beach, NY/Long Beach). "She's a great contact hitter with power," Olivieri said of Folts, who moved to second base last year after playing short her first two seasons. "Defensively, I expect her to be even better this season." Shepherd will likely bat sixth and, in addition to being able to play any of the outfield positions, can also play third and first base. "She's a heckuva an athlete," Olivieri said. "She can hit and she runs well. She's more selective at the plate this year; I expect her to hit over .300." In addition to LeBarron, Folts, Mather and Shepherd, Olivieri will count on the healthy return of Passaro. A First Team Empire 8 and ECAC all-star as a freshman in 2008, when she batted .457 with 34 runs batted in, Passaro played through injury in 2009 and saw her batting average drop to .214 with nine RBIs. If Passaro can bounce back, she'll combine with Folts and LeBarron to form a potent middle of the lineup. "Ashley is looking a lot better, much like she did her freshman season," Olivieri said. "If she gets back to form, it helps our whole lineup." Sophomore pitcher/utility player Nicole Hedrick (Albany, NY/Catholic Central) and junior outfielder, captain Brittany Loucks (Addison, NY/Addison) will be counted on to provide offensive punch as well. Hedrick, in particular, is expected to make a greater impact on the Saxon lineup than she did in 2009, when she saw limited at-bats. As a freshman, Hedrick made the most of her opportunities at the plate, batting .385 (15 for 39).

with nine runs scored and 11 driven in. Primarily a pitcher in 2009, she will see more time in the field she can play outfield and shortstop and may see some time hitting as a designated player. One of the team's fastest players, Olivieri envisions Hedrick hitting leadoff. "She has great speed, hits the ball well and has some real pop in her bat," Olivieri said of Hedrick. "I'm really looking forward to having a true leadoff hitter." Loucks hit .314 as a freshman in 2008 and saw her production drop off last season, when she hit .235 with five runs and eight RBIs in a more limited role. Loucks should see more playing time this season and will be expected to contribute defensively in the outfield, possibly platooning with sophomore Angela Netta (Rahway, NJ/Mother Seton Regional). Netta hit .296 (8 for 27) with 15 runs scored (mostly as a pinch runner). "I'm expecting (Loucks) to hit the way she did her freshman year, when she had some big hits for us. Her confidence is up and she's really improved defensively," Olivieri said. Netta "can cover a lot of ground in the outfield and she's a very aggressive hitter and baserunner." With the graduation of four-year starting catcher Nicole Messura, redshirt freshman Emily Fenton (Thorofare, NJ/West Deptford) takes over behind the plate. "She has to be a rock back there, stopping balls and throwing out runners. Being a freshman, she'll be tested by other teams," Olivieri said of Fenton, who missed the 2009 campaign with injury. "She has a very good bat and can drive the ball." Another freshman, shortstop Kassandra Corsi (Willoughby, OH/Willoughby South), will be counted on to step in and contribute right away. After a solid fall season in which she batted .585 (seven for 12) in three games, Olivieri will have her batting second when the season begins. "She's a good contact hitter with some pop in her bat," Olivieri said. "We'll need her to come in and play solid defense at short." Then Saxons' bench is not as deep as in past years. Freshman Hana Gross (Union, NJ/Union) and Netta will back up Fenton behind the plate. Junior Shanna Ewoldt (Tucson, AZ/Waubansie Valley) (one hit in five at-bats in six games last year) will back up LeBarron at third. Senior Jessica French (Springwater, NY/Wayland-Cohocton), a transfer from RIT, will be a designated player and backup first baseman. Freshmen Laura Haas (Buffalo, NY/Immaculata Academy) and Erin Johnstone (West Henrietta, NY/Rush-Henrietta) will provide depth in the outfield. Olivieri is happy with the balance he has with his lineup, which possesses power and an ability to get on base, more so than in past years. "I like our lineup. We've had a lot of homerun hitters in the past and we still have players who can hit it out of the park but these girls will drive in runs with timely hits," he said. "In the past, we've gotten the three-run homer in the second inning, or when we had a big lead. We really need to be able to drive runners in from scoring position. Of our 11 losses last year, seven were by one run. We haven't come through in those situations late in a tie game or a close game and we need to if we want to get past the Empire 8 playoffs." A pair of all-Empire 8 pitchers junior Chelsey Cary (Corfu, NY/Pembroke) and Hedrick will be counted on to keep opponents' scoring down. Hedrick came on strong once conference play began and wound up going 9-7 with a 2.34 ERA, shutting out perennial Empire 8 power Ithaca en route to being named a First Team conference all-star. Cary, who had a perfect game and a no-hitter in her first season after transferring to AU from Monroe Community College, finished with a 12-3 mark and 2.31 ERA. Hedrick and Cary possess different styles of pitching and Olivieri is counting on them to provide an effective one-two punch in conference doubleheaders. "Chelsey throws the ball hard and can make hitters miss," Olivieri said of Cary, who had 113 strikeouts in 2009. "Nicole locates her pitches well and uses all sorts of different speeds to keep hitters off balance." We have two all-conference pitchers and to be able to use them back-to-back in doubleheaders is huge for us," the coach said, adding that Shepherd who had a 1.93 earned run average in her only appearance (a win) last year will see some time pitching this year. "Our pitching staff is very solid." Olivieri added that he'll give Cary more opportunities at the plate this season. Olivieri said defense will be a huge key to the Saxons' success. "With Corsi at short, and Fenton playing well behind the plate, it makes our infield a lot stronger. We're solid across the board defensively." Winning the Empire 8 title and earning the school's first-ever trip to the NCAAs is a realistic goal, one Olivieri said the entire team is committed to achieving. "The chemistry on this team is the best I've had in five years. They're here to play and play hard," he said. "The senior experience we have with LeBarron, Folts and Mather is huge, and I'm very excited about our other returnees and new players."