

Pitching will be key to Saxons' return to Empire 8 prominence

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ALFRED, NY - As the Alfred University softball team's 2012 season approaches, head coach Gino Olivieri admits there are some question marks. One thing he's reasonably sure of is this: as the team's pitching staff goes, so go the Saxons. "We'll be a good hitting, good fielding team," Olivieri said. "The question mark will be how our young pitchers come along." Lost to graduation from last year's 16-9 squad is three-year stalwart pitcher Chelsey Cary, who left AU a three-time Empire 8 all-star after setting the school career records for wins (40) and shutouts (16) and single-season mark for strikeouts (138). With senior Nicole Hedrick (Albany, NY/Catholic Central) moving full-time to shortstop, Olivieri has six first-year hurlers competing for time in the pitcher's circle. "We'll need to get them a lot of innings and develop them quickly," the seventh-year head coach commented. The team embarks on a 12-game Spring Break trip March 5-10 to Tuscon, AZ. It is there, in the desert, that Olivieri hopes the questions surrounding his pitching staff will be answered. Freshmen pitchers Alison Wickwire (Towanda, PA/Towanda), Jessica O'Sullivan (Groton, MA/Groton Dunstable Regional) and Betsy Clark (Webster, NY/Bishop Kearney) showed a lot of promise during fall scrimmages, Olivier commented. Wickwire "throws extremely hard," he said, while O'Sullivan, a lefty, and Clark have good movement on their pitches. Freshmen Ashley Sabourin (Brewerton, NY/Paul V. Moore), Samantha Jo Muller (Port Jervis, NY/Port Jervis) and sophomore Tori Kramp (Yardley, PA/Pennsbury) will also have an opportunity to see time. Although a sophomore, Kramp is freshman-eligible, as she missed last year with injury. "Early on, they all will get innings," Olivieri said. "We'll see who steps up." Olivieri is pleased with his offense, despite the loss of several key hitters from last year's squad. Hedrick has been as good a hitter as any in the Empire 8 Conference throughout her career, earning First Team Empire 8 honors each of the last three seasons and Second Team All-American honors as a sophomore in 2010. She hit .423 with 33 hits, 12 RBIs and a team-leading 27 runs scored in 2011. "Hedrick can really hit the ball hard and is one of our top power hitters," said Olivieri, adding he may move Hedrick from the leadoff spot - where's she's been each of the last two years - to the middle of the order to take better advantage of her power. Senior utility player Angela Netta (Rahway, NJ/Mother Seton Regional), who plays primarily as the leftfielder, junior catcher Hana Gross (Union, NJ/Union), junior second baseman Maressa Mistretta (Shirley, NY/Longwood) and sophomore centerfielder Breeal Delgado (Rancho Cucamonga, CA/Los Osos) join Hedrick as returning starters who are proven offensive weapons. Netta, a two-time E8 all-star (First Team 2010, Second Team last season) batted .286 with seven extra-base hits (two homers) and 12 RBIs; Gross led the team with three homeruns and was second in runs batted in with 17; Mistretta, an Empire 8 honorable mention pick in her first year at AU after transferring from SUNY Farmingdale, hit .315 with 10 runs scored and 13 driven in; and Delgado batted .276 (five doubles) with 15 runs scored, 12 RBIs and a team-leading eight stolen bases in eight attempts. "Delgado, Netta and Gross hit the ball hard. "Mistretta sees the ball so well and doesn't strike out. She's just a good solid contact hitter who can drive the ball. We have a lot of line drive hitters returning, but I have some coming in who can pop the ball out of the park." Wickwire and O'Sullivan are two such hitters, and may because of their offensive ability alternate between the pitcher's circle and first base. Sophomore Jessica Warner (Runnemede, NJ/Triton), a transfer from William Paterson, will start at third base and possesses homerun power. "Warner hit .350 (at William Paterson) and will be a rock at third base for us. "She's a fantastic leader and a real power hitter. She just needs to be more consistent at the plate." Sophomore Rachel Guszick (Sparrowbush, NY/Port Jervis), hampered by injury last year, is a line drive hitter with power and will

compete for the rightfield job. Sophomore infielder Melissa Montano (West Covina, CA/Walnut) has developed more power since a freshman year that saw her hit .259 with eight runs and three RBIs in a utility role. If Hedrick is moved down in the order, the Saxons will have plenty of speed at the top. Sophomore infielder Stephanie Arguello (Placentia, CA/Vista del Lago) and freshman outfielder Alyson Hampton (Oxnard, CA/Oxnard) are slap-type hitters who can wreak havoc on the base-paths. If Hampton emerges as the starting rightfielder, she could be the team's leadoff hitter. Arguello, a .457 hitter (eight runs, four RBIs) in 17 games as a backup infielder, will push for a spot in the lineup and would also be a weapon at the top of the order. Junior Laura Haas (Buffalo, NY/Immaculata Academy) (.267, six runs scored), sophomore Danielle Mastropierro (Randolph, NJ/Randolph) (four runs scored last year, mostly as a pinch runner) and freshman Katherine Harrison (Berlin, CT/Berlin) add depth to the outfield, and Muller can play outfield as well as pitch. Also adding depth to the team will be sophomore first baseman-designated player Jackie Tomisman (Niskayuna, NY/Niskayuna), who was an outfielder as a freshman, when she had two hits in five at-bats and drove in a run in a reserve role. Freshman Lauren Fix (Hudson, NY/Germantown) will back up Gross behind the plate. Olivieri said his defense will be an asset. "It's a very strong defense with tons of depth. I have Montano, who could start on most Empire 8 teams, but just happens to be stuck behind our senior All-American (Hedrick) at shortstop. The same could be said of Arguello. Netta and Delgado are exceptional outfielders; Delgado, with her speed, makes up so much ground in center. Gross is a solid catcher and our infielders are very good. I'm very confident in our defense." With little worry about hitting and defense, Olivieri again pointed to pitching as the key to his team's success as it tries to return to the four-team Empire 8 tournament and a potential berth in the NCAA championships. AU finished tied for fourth and missed out on the conference tournament, the winner of which earns the Empire 8's automatic NCAA bid. "We'll hit with anyone and we'll field with anyone. It all depends on how well we pitch," he said. "But I think our young players are up to the task. I think they will produce."