

Veteran AU football team seeks Empire 8 crown

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ALFRED, NY With 16 starters returning from a squad that went 8-3 in 2006 and captured its third straight ECAC bowl title, the Alfred University football team is poised to reach even greater heights of success in 2007. There are some question marks solidifying an offensive line and linebacking corps that each lost two starters but head coach Dave Murray feels the talent and experience he has returning may make the 2007 squad the best he's had in his nine years at AU. "This is the most experience we've had coming back," Murray commented. "This is definitely the fastest offense I've had here and, if we can shore up our linebacking corps, we have the potential to have one of our best defenses." There is no shortage of quality skill players on offense, which will once again be led by record-setting senior quarterback Paul Keeley (Caledonia, NY/Caledonia-Mumford). Keeley has started each of the last two years after transferring to AU from rival St. John Fisher and has set or is poised to set several single-season and career school passing records. His 25 touchdown passes last season broke a school record and gave him 46 for his career, another school mark. His 2,419 passing yards in 2006 set a new school record and with 4,592 career passing yards after two seasons, he needs only 1,121 yards this year to establish another new AU career standard. Murray knows that his team's chances at success will begin with Keeley. "He's such an intelligent quarterback. He plays with a lot of poise and has terrific leadership skills," Murray said. "Paul's a proven winner. He has that ability to get us into the best plays we can be in against different defenses. It's always nice for a guy to have two years under his belt as a starting quarterback." Sophomore Josh Shoemaker (Troy, NY/Albany Academy) and junior Matt Eisenhauer (Kenmore, NY/Kenmore West) will back up Keeley. It helps that all skill players from last season, including the team's top seven receivers and top four rushers, return. Murray believes this season's receiving corps will be the best he's ever had at AU and there is tremendous depth at running back. A talented and deep group of wideouts is led by sophomore Jared Manzer (Johnson City, NY/Johnson City), last year's Empire 8 Conference Rookie of the Year and a First Team conference all-star. Manzer led the team with 53 receptions for 678 yards and a school single-season record 10 touchdowns. Junior Trevor Bork (Victor, NY/Victor) (28 catches, 275 yards, one TD in 2006), the team's leading receiver as a freshman in 2005, and senior Saucobie Riley (Rochester, NY/Marshall) (28, 446, 3) round out the three-receiver set Murray expects to employ. "This is the fastest group of receivers I've had at Alfred," Murray said. Manzer has a rare combination of size, strength and speed; Bork is a possession receiver who may possess the best hands of the three; and Riley has breakaway speed and a knack for getting tough yards after the catch. "Having those three guys out there will open up the run game. While we hope to have a balanced attack, they give us the ability to be a pretty exciting offense. I've never had this type of team speed," Murray said. Senior Ben Stanton (Ford Edward, NY/Hudson Falls), junior Craig Chase (Erie, PA/Cathedral Prep) (18 catches, 243 yards in 2006) and sophomore Milton Harding (Binghamton, NY/Johnson City) provide depth at wide receiver. The returning starter at tight end, senior Matt Gibbins (Clifton Park, NY/Shenendehowa), only strengthens the Saxons' passing game. A Second Team all-conference selection in 2006, Gibbins caught 22 passes for 373 yards and seven touchdowns. Alfred's running game is equally deep and talented, with a solid one-two punch provided by senior tailback Elmer Newsome (Cadosia, NY/Hancock) and sophomore tailback Vinson Hendrix (Rochester, NY/East). Newsome, a two-time conference all-star who ran for more than 1,800 yards over the last two seasons, is a big, bruising back who will get most of his yards between the tackles. Hendrix, who rushed for 374 yards as a freshman, is the more versatile of the two, possessing breakaway speed and pass-catching ability (19 catches, 235 yards and a score in 2006). "Vinson ended up being out number one back by the end of last season. He's the fastest player I've had here and he's gotten bigger and stronger from last year. We're expecting big things from him," Murray commented. "Elmer is a big, solid tailback. It will be nice to have his size to go with Vinson's speed and quickness." Junior Morgan O'Brien (Bradford, PA/Bradford), who ran for 284 yards in a reserve role last year, and sophomore Dustin Morris (Cortland, NY/Homer), a junior varsity player a year ago, provide depth at tailback. Junior Justin Hamblin (New York Mills, NY/New York Mills), a starter last year, and junior Jeff Pecoraro (Williamsville, NY/Williamsville South), who missed last season with an injury, will compete for time at fullback. Senior Don Miller (LeRoy, NY/LeRoy), a 315-pound All-American defensive tackle who rushed for a team-leading five TDs last year as the team's short yardage and goal line back, will fill that role again this year. Murray said the greatest question mark for his offense comes along the line. Replacing four-year starter and three-time conference all-star Mike Yokopovich at left tackle will be a challenge. A pair of three-year senior starters center Mike Callahan (Scotia, NY/Scotia-Glenville) and left guard Brian Caston (Webster, NY/Webster Schroeder) return, as does senior

right tackle Justin Hanft (East Otto, NY/Maple Grove), who logged several starts in 2006. Hanft, along with seniors Brian DeCabia (Calverton, NY/Riverhead), Ryan LePore (Rochester, NY/Greece Athena), Darryl Purucker (Cheektowaga, NY/St. Francis) and Matt Corwin (Ticonderoga, NY/Ticonderoga); and sophomores Dave Carletta (Webster, NY/Webster Schroeder) and Eric Manning (Hoosick Falls, NY/Hoosick Falls), will compete to fill two tackle positions and the right guard spot. "The offensive line is the big unknown right now," Murray said. "The preseason will be tremendously important to us to get that group solidified." The Saxons have come to be known for solid defense, and that should be the case this season, thanks in large part to the return of Miller. An Empire 8 First Team all-star and AFCA First Team All-American in 2006, Miller is a three-time Empire 8 all-star and four-year starter who has totaled 154 tackles (57 in 2006, six for loss, four sacks) thus far in his career. "Donnie is a big, strong kid and you feel like you'll always win the battle of the line of scrimmage when he's in there," Murray said. "Other teams have to double team him and that has opened up opportunities for our other linemen and linebackers." While AU will have to overcome the loss of three-year starting end and three-time conference all-star Andy Rantz, two other starters senior tackle Mike Penkin (Rochester, NY/Greece Athena) and junior end Jake Syracuse (LeRoy, NY/LeRoy) return. Penkin, a Second Team all-conference pick, had 40 tackles (6.5 for loss, two sacks) and blocked a pair of kicks in 2006. Syracuse, who missed the first three games of 2006 with injury, finished with 28 tackles, including four for loss and two sacks. Senior Ryan Katta (Forrestville, NY/Forrestville), who started in place of Syracuse early last year, and junior Rob Ritter (Fairport, NY/Penfield), will compete for the other starting end position. The linebacking crew took a hit with the graduation of two starters: two-time all-Empire 8 pick and three-year starting middle linebacker Nick Gatto and Ralph Jackson. Murray is excited about the return of a pair of outside linebackers, sophomore Chad Pieri (LeRoy, NY/Caledonia-Mumford) and junior Blake Fuller (Newark, NY/Newark). A starter as a freshman in 2006, Pieri 67 had tackles (second to Gatto's 76), including team highs in solo stops (34, tied with Miller), tackles for loss (10) and sacks (five). Fuller, who returns to the team after taking last season off, provides an immediate boost to the defense. A two-time Empire 8 all-star (honorable mention as a freshman in 2004; Second Team the following season), Fuller totaled 121 tackles (68 solo, 12.5 for loss, seven sacks), four forced fumbles and an interception his first two seasons. "Chad's big strength is his ability to bring pressure off the corner," Murray said. "Blake had an outstanding sophomore year for us. He has a great game sense, is very athletic and is a positive leader. His addition really strengthens our defense." Players competing to replace Gatto in the middle include sophomores Michael Murphy (Buffalo, NY/Bishop Timon) and Marc Mangovski (Kirkville, NY/East Syracuse-Minoa), and senior Bobby Plate (Seneca Falls, NY/Mynderse). Those seeking playing time at outside linebacker include senior Nate Pleakis (Olean, NY/Olean) and juniors John Soule (Richfield Spring, NY/Richfield Springs) and David Dusharm (Gouverneur, NY/Gouverneur). The secondary lost one first stringer two-year starting cornerback Mike Coupe to graduation. Still, the defensive backfield will be a strong suit, thanks to the return of junior free safety Brian Nitsche (Portville, NY/Portville), a First Team Empire 8 all-star as a sophomore last year. Nitsche had 41 tackles, two interceptions, and led the team with seven pass breakups. "He's the quarterback of our defense," Murray said of Nitsche. "He's a terrific athlete who's solid in coverage and as a tackler." Starting alongside Nitsche will be senior strong safety Dan Medlock (Garden City Park, NY/Mineola). A starter last year, Medlock had 36 tackles (28 solo) to go with a team-high four interceptions. Senior cornerback Josh Rammacher (Angola, NY/Lake Shore), who missed the season-ending ECAC bowl game win over Rochester with an arm injury, is set to return, as is sophomore corner Ron Smith (Lyons, NY/Lyons), a starter in 2005 who did not play last year. Rammacher notched 41 tackles (31 solo, two for loss, and a sack), an interception and six pass breakups on his way to earning honorable mention from the Empire 8. Smith had 31 tackles and an interception (returned for a TD at Ithaca) as a freshman in 2005. "Having (Rammacher and Smith) back gives us four big, physical defensive backs who can run and cover," Murray said. Providing depth in the defensive backfield will be junior cornerback Matt Van Woeart (Schenectady, NY/Schalmont), senior safety Bobby Magiera (Little Valley, NY/Salamanca) and sophomore safety Nick Barton (South Glens Falls, NY/South Glens Falls). Special teams will be solid, with the return of senior placekicker Chris Reynolds (Pittsford, NY/Pittsford Sutherland). A starter since his freshman season, Reynolds holds single-season and career records for field goals and extra points made and points scored by a kicker. A two-time conference all-star, Reynolds is nearly automatic on PATs, having made 97 of 101 for his career, and has made 71 percent (29 of 41) of his field goal tries. "We've become very spoiled with Chris Reynolds. He's a clutch kicker and the team has such high confidence in his ability," Murray said. Rammacher, who has handled punting duties the last two seasons, will fill that role again this season. He was a conference all-star as a punter in 2005, when he averaged 38.5 yards per kick (an AU single-season record), but saw his average drop to 32.5 last season. Junior Kris Sambor (Wester, NY/Webster Thomas) and sophomore Pete Marley (Warsaw, NY/Warsaw)

will push him for the punter's job. The Saxons have a host of talented return men, with Manzer, Bork, Riley and Hendrix expected to handle kickoff return duties. Manzer averaged 21.6 yards on 16 returns in 2006, while Bork returned nine kicks for a 22.7-yard average. Riley and Hendrix each returned one kick. Bork is the leading candidate to handle punt returns. Murray is optimistic that his team has a great chance to achieve the one goal that has eluded it the last three seasons. While the Saxons have won a combined 25 games since 2004, a school record for victories in a three-year span, AU has not reached the NCAA playoffs during Murray's tenure. That will change if the Saxons win the Empire 8 title and the automatic bid to the NCAAs that goes with it. "The last few years, we've become competitive with the best teams in our league," he said. "Our goal, as always, is to be our league's champion." AU faces a challenging schedule. In addition to a full Empire 8 slate that includes perennial playoff contenders St. John Fisher, Ithaca and Springfield, the Saxons face tough non-conference opposition from Liberty League powerhouse Hobart and Thiel of the Presidents' Athletic Conference. "It's very important we get out of the gate early," Murray said, noting that his team's final three games are at Hobart, Ithaca and Fisher. "That's three top-15 teams in the country. We need to improve consistently throughout the season because our biggest three games could be in weeks eight, nine and ten."