

Alfred University athletics enjoy tremendous success in 2014-15

7/08/15



It was a banner year for Alfred University's intercollegiate athletics program in 2014-15, as a school single-season record four teams competed in their respective Empire 8 Conference championship tournaments, with the softball team winning a conference crown.

Saxon teams competing in sports sponsored by the Empire 8 finished sixth in the Empire 8 Commissioner's Cup standings, the best ever for AU in the 16-year history of the conference. The Commissioner's Cup rankings are determined by how teams finish in the league standings of each Empire 8-sponsored sport.

Saxon teams finished in the top four in six sports, with a school-record four men's soccer, women's tennis, men's basketball and softball -- competing in Empire 8 championship tournament. Two other AU teams men's tennis and men's lacrosse finished among the top four in the league standings, but missed out on berths in their respective conference tournaments due to tiebreakers.

"I am extremely proud of the efforts of our coaches and student-athletes in raising the competitive level across the department," said [Paul Vecchio](#), Director of Athletics. "We made some giant strides amongst our Empire 8 competitors which is where we will always measure our athletic progress."

By winning the AU-hosted E8 tournament, the softball team earned an automatic bid to the NCAA Division III playoffs, and proceeded to make a historic run through the national championship tournament. The Saxons swept through the Alfred Regional, then took two-of-three from Heidelberg at the Tiffin, OH, Super Regional to qualify for the eight-team Division III College World Series in Salem, VA.

AU had two National Fastpitch Coaches Association (NFCA) All-Americans sophomore **Liz Thompson (Horseheads, NY/Horseheads)** and senior **Alison Wickwire (Towanda, PA/Towanda)** among its seven Empire 8 all-stars. [Gino Olivieri](#) earned the 250th win of his AU career and was named E8 Coach of the Year for a third time and ECAC Upstate Coach of the Year for a second time. Thompson was named Empire 8 and ECAC Upstate Player of the Year and Wickwire was named to the Division III championship all-tournament team.

The Saxons, who finished the year 40-7, were ninth in the final NFCA Division III national rankings, easily eclipsing the program's previous high of 25th in the final 2010 rankings. AU is set to return eight of 10 starters in 2016, making a third straight trip to the NCAAs a distinct possibility.

Three other AU teams men's soccer, women's tennis and men's basketball also competed in their respective four-team Empire 8 championship tournaments. The men's basketball team was making its second straight Empire 8 tournament appearance; for the women, it was the first time the team had competed in the E8 championships since the league adopted a four-team tournament format.

The men's soccer team, guided by first-year head coach [Matt Smith](#), earned a bid to the Empire 8 Conference championship tournament, its first since 2006. The tournament's fourth seed, AU took top-seeded and eventual champ Stevens through two overtime periods before falling 6-5 on penalty kicks. Smith would be named Empire 8 Coach of the Year and senior **Jeff Thomas (Canandaigua, NY/Canandaigua)** was named a First Team Empire 8 and ECAC Upstate all-star and a First Team National Soccer Coaches Association of America (NCSAA) East Region pick.

The women's tennis team won nine matches and posted a 5-3 mark in Empire 8 play. Three members of the team -- junior **Rachel Cook (Youngstown, OH/Laurel Springs)** and seniors **Brennan Ferguson (Destrehan, LA/Ursuline)** and **Emily Eisenberg (Oyster Bay, NY/Oyster Bay)** -- earned all-conference recognition.

The men's basketball team made a second straight trip to the Empire 8 championships. The Saxons defeated nationally-ranked E8 power St. John Fisher to finish with an 11-5 E8 mark, the best league record in school history. The second-seeded Saxons made it to the tournament championship game, where they fell to top-seeded Fisher. Still, the Saxons finished the year with 19 wins, the most at AU in 26 years. Senior forward **Dalton Walsh (Stockton, NY/Cassadaga Valley)** was named a First Team Empire 8 all-star, the first time in a decade a Saxon men's player had earned that distinction.

The men's lacrosse team also made the postseason, hosting the ECAC Division III championship tournament. The Saxons were edged, 14-13, by Western New England in the tournament title game to finish the year 13-4, the team's best record in two decades. AU won a school-record five Empire 8 games and four Saxons earned all-conference recognition. Among them was freshman **Jake Lynch (Whitney Point, NY/Whitney Point)**, who was named Empire 8 and ECAC Mid-Atlantic Rookie of the Year.

Several other Saxon teams enjoyed success in 2014-15 as well.

Senior **Chrissy Behr (Surf City, NJ/Southern Regional)** won Empire 8 and state titles in the 50-meter freestyle to lead the women's **swimming and diving team** at the Empire 8/Upper New York State Collegiate Swimming Association championships. Behr (First Team) and sophomore **Dylan Staniszewski (Oakton, VA/Oakton)** (Second Team) each earned Empire 8 all-conference recognition. On the men's side, three Saxon seniors earned all-conference honors. **David Luke (Ocala, FL/West Port)** was a First Team all-star and went on to compete at the NCAA championships, while **David Coombes (Dansville, NY/Dansville)** and **Zac Toth (Lockport, NY/Starpoint)** were each named to the Second Team.

Seniors **Miasia Hillman (Buffalo, NY/Hutch Tech)** and **Sean Locker (Corning, NY/Corning-Painted Post West)** enjoyed tremendous success in track and field, each making a return trip to the NCAA Division III outdoor championships. Hillman was outstanding in the indoor season, winning state and Empire 8 titles in the 60-meter dash and a state crown in the 200-meter dash. She set school indoor records in those events and the 400-meter dash. Hillman's success carried over to the outdoor season, when she won state and Empire 8 titles in both the 100-meter and 200-meter races, setting E8 championship meet records in both events and a school record in the latter. Hillman, who qualified for the national meet in the 100 meters last year, competed in that event and the 200 meters this spring. Locker also competed a second straight year at the outdoor nationals, in the pole vault. He won Empire 8 and New York state titles in the javelin, then took second at the ECAC championships, turning in a throw of 60.77 meters to break his own school record.

The AU Western and English equestrian teams each sent two riders to the Intercollegiate Horse Show Association (IHSA) national championships. Senior **Lexi Buckheit (Mansfield, PA/Mansfield)**, competing in her fourth straight Western nationals, took fourth in open reining, while teammate, sophomore **Erica Wise (Dansville, NY/Dansville)**, was fourth in beginner horsemanship. In the English national show, junior **Stephanie Zimicki (Lockport, NY/St. Mary's)** took second in intermediate equitation, while junior **Kassandra McCarn (Gouverneur, NY/Gouverneur)** earned honorable mention in novice equitation on the flat.

The football team, under the direction of first-year head coach **Bob Rankl**, went 5-5. The Saxons will look to compete for an Empire 8 crown in 2015, as they return 16 starters (eight on both offense and defense), including five conference all-stars.

The men's tennis team saw the return of **Brian Friedland** as head coach and went 11-4 and just missed out on the postseason. The Saxon's 5-3 Empire 8 record tied with two other teams for third in the conference, but they missed out on the league championship tournament due to tiebreakers. Junior Connor Doud earned all-conference honors for a third straight year.

Three other teams had coaches in either their first or second years. A young but talented women's soccer team, led by second-year coach **Aileen Ascolese**, had an Empire 8 all-star in freshman goalkeeper **Sammy Jo Shanahan (Valley Stream, NY/Valley Stream South)**. The volleyball team, guided by first-year coach **Amanda Hubbard**, beat Hartwick for its first E8 tournament win in three seasons. Senior **Kaitlyn Button (Cazenovia, NY/Cazenovia)** earned all-Empire 8 honors (her third time in four years) for the women's lacrosse team, led by first-year coach **Erynn Anderson**.

The future looks bright for Alfred University's sports teams, particularly in how they fare in Empire 8 competition. Vecchio pointed to a trend over the last four years that signifies a climb up the E8 ranks.

"Our graduating seniors had only won 27 Empire 8 games in their first year at AU (2011-12) and concluded their careers by winning 52 E8 contests this year," Vecchio noted. "That is a significant and noteworthy accomplishment and I look forward to continued progress, and more Empire 8 championships, in the years ahead."