

Veteran leadership marks AU women's lacrosse team

2/19/09



ALFRED, NY Third-year Alfred University women's lacrosse coach Samantha Valder has the type of veteran talent and leadership needed for the Lady Saxons to be a factor in the Empire 8 Conference. Two years ago, Alfred struggled to a 1-10 record after emerging from a one-year discontinuation of the program. Last season the team, made up solely of freshmen and sophomores, improved to 2-10. Those players, now a year older with one and two seasons of starting experience, are poised to lead the Saxons to greater heights in 2009. "Being a year older and having that additional experience is going to be huge," Valder commented. "There is so much more team leadership now that we have juniors. You can see them stepping up and becoming more vocal." In the last two seasons, the young Saxons looked overmatched on the field. That, too, has changed as they've gotten older and acclimated themselves to the college game. "They've taken it upon themselves to work outside of the season on their stick skills and conditioning. Their skills are immensely improved. Instead of working on (fundamentals) in practice, we've been able to focus on our offense and defense." AU will need to improve on both areas. Last year, the Saxons allowed nearly twice as many goals per game (14) as they scored (7.7). The disparity was particularly evident in Empire 8 games, when Alfred was outscored by a combined 123 goals to 39. Still, despite going winless in Empire 8 play, Alfred had its chances to win in conference, falling in close contests to Hartwick (14-13) and Elmira (12-10). Valder is confident she has the talent on offense and defense to improve in both areas. On offense, Valder wants to see more balanced scoring. Last year two players attackers Michelle Adams (Horseheads, NY/Horseheads) and Abbey Schaffnit (Bemus Point, NY/Maple Grove) accounted for more than half of the team's goals. Adams, now a sophomore, had 37 goals (including a school-record tying 10 against Hartwick) and was an Empire 8 honorable mention all-star, while Schaffnit, a junior, had 12 goals. "We need to get more people involved on the attack end," Valder commented. "Last season, we relied primarily on two players and became predictable. Teams were double-teaming (Adams and Schaffnit). It will be a lot harder for teams to do that to us this year." Valder said the Saxons will count on junior attackers Emily Tobin (Penfield, NY/Penfield) and junior Bailey Umphries (Heuvelton, NY/Heuvelton), and a solid group of midfielders juniors Amanda Sullivan (Lexington, MA/Lexington) and Kate Simonds (Park City, UT/Park City) and sophomores Jennifer Omilanowicz (Mexico, NY/Mexico) and Elyse Caldwell (Endwell, NY/Maine-Endwell) to take some of the scoring burden from Adams and Schaffnit. Tobin has been an integral part of the offense, particularly last year when she dished out a team-leading 25 assists (including a school single-game record eight at Hartwick). "We want to rotate more players behind the net," Valder said. "We need Emily to be more of a scoring threat, rather than just a distributor of the ball." Umphries, who will also see some time at midfield, returns after missing seven games to a knee injury last season. "Bailey is a vocal leader. We'll look for her to keep things settled on the offensive end," Valder said, adding that Umphries will be counted on to score more goals this season. Other players who will compete for time at attack are freshman Ivy Lam (Sanford, ME/Sanford) and Emily Crosby (Fairport, NY/Fairport). Sophomore Ashley Denio (St. Marys, PA/Elk County Christian), will play attack and midfield. Denio, who Valder says possesses the hardest shot on the team, tallied one goal in 10 contests last year. Caldwell moves to midfield from attack, while Sullivan and Omilanowicz shift to midfield from defense. Caldwell, the team leader in groundballs a season ago (44), will be looked upon to increase her scoring output (she had nine goals last year, third on the team). Omilanowicz (six goals, one assists in 2008) and Sullivan (one goal) will be counted on to put the ball in the net as well. She netted two goals

last year and Simonds had five to go with six assists."(Caldwell) is extremely quick and her transition game is solid. She moves the ball well and get almost any groundball she goes after," Valder said. Sullivan, who will see time at midfield and defense, "is a leader on defense and is one of our fastest players who will key our transition game."Omilanowicz, perhaps the fastest player on the team, will play midfield and defense. "She sees the field well in transition and will be a scoring threat. On defense, she anticipates the ball well."Sophomore Allyson Klopp (Derby, NY/Lake Shore) started in the midfield last year (scoring four goals) and will see time again this season. Freshman Kelly Emrich (Churchville, NY/Churchville-Chili) provides depth at midfield.The defense will be solid. In addition to Sullivan and Omilanowicz rotating in from the midfield, Valder can count on the veteran leadership of juniors Emily Steen (South Pasadena, CA/Purnell School) and Lisa Button (Troupsburg, NY/Jasper-Troupsburg). Steen was a Second Team Empire 8 all-star in 2008, when she had three goals and 26 groundballs to go with a team-best 22 draw controls. Button added 11 points on six goals and five assists and picked up 30 groundballs. "They're leaders on our defense. If someone gets beat (Steen) slides well to stop the ball. Both are fast and can move the ball up the field in transition," Valder said.Freshman Hannah Scott (Randolph, VT/Randolph Union) will see meaningful playing time right away. "She's one of the best defenders as a freshman I've seen," Valder said.Also competing for time on defense will be junior Amanda Empey (Bloomfield, NY/Bloomfield), who played in seven contests a year ago, and sophomore Emily Merkey (Walworth, NY/Wayne), a first-year player.Sophomore Kate Baughman (Rush, NY/Rush-Henrietta) returns as starting goalie. As a freshman in 2008, she played every minute in goal for the Saxons and had a .427 save percentage. Valder said she has become more of a vocal leader and has taken on more of the responsibilities of directing the defense. "Her skills have improved tremendously. She's not a freshman anymore."Valder said for the team to be successful in its goal of reaching the four-team Empire 8 championship tournament, the Saxons must cut down on turnovers (23.6 per game last year) and fouls (21.4 per contest). Creating more scoring opportunities is also a must, as is limiting the opponents' time on the AU end of the field."Increasing our numbers is really going to help. We'll be able to move the ball up the field. We seemed to be stuck on our own end a lot last year," Valder said. "This year, we'll have a solid seven-player goal-scoring threat. The same can be said for our defense. We have players who can stop the ball and get it up the field. I'm very excited with the team we have this year."