

Mix of talented veterans, promising youngsters lead Saxons in 2012

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ALFRED, NY — When the Alfred University football team opens its 2012 season on Sept. 8 at RPI, many new faces will be present on both sides of the ball, as a combined 13 starters from last year were lost to graduation.

While the production of those departed seniors will be missed, head coach Dave Murray welcomes back several solid first-stringers on offense and defense. Combined with a host of talented players making the transition from backup to starter, Murray is optimistic the 2012 Saxons have what it takes to improve on an 8-3 overall record (4-3 Empire 8) compete for a conference crown.

“We have some talented kids coming back,” said Murray, who begins his 14th season at the Saxons’ helm. “We also have a lot of young kids, some inexperienced kids, who need to step in and fill some holes. But these are some really talented kids; they just need to mature and continue to get better for us to compete for that conference title.”

AU will count on an experience lined, which includes a pair of four-year starters, to anchor the defense, and an outstanding running back tandem to pace the offense.

The Saxons took a big hit on defense with the loss of all four starting linebackers in the team’s 3-4 base defensive set. The group included All-American outside linebacker Nick Clark, who left AU as the team’s career leader in tackles, and Wes Smith, a Second Team All-Empire 8 selection and one of team’s surest tacklers.

Still, there are some standouts on this year’s defense, led by a quartet of returning senior starters who Murray will count on to continue their outstanding play while setting an example for the younger players.

The team will switch back to a 4-3 defense in 2012, with the line anchored by standout senior nose guard **Mike Raplee (Dundee, NY/Dundee)**, a D3football.com All-American in 2010 and 2011 and a preseason pick heading into this season, and senior end **Chris Steeves (Rochester, NY/Gates-Chili)**, who enters his fourth season as a starter.

Senior **Reggie Pressley (Rochester, NY/Gates-Chili)**, a starter the last two seasons at strong safety and an honorable mention all-E8 pick in 2011, moves to outside linebacker, and senior free safety **Jon Jackson (East Amherst, NY/Bishop Timon)**, who has developed into one of the team's best defenders since becoming a starter at the end of his sophomore season.

Raplee was third on the team in tackles in 2011, with 68 (8.5 for loss, team-best 4.5 sacks) en route to being named First Team all-conference. Steeves had 40 stops (five for loss, 2.5 sacks), with six pass breakups and a team-best three fumble recoveries.

“Raplee is an athletic freak as far as defensive linemen go. He's 6-1, 245, and runs in the 4.6 range so he presents all sorts of matchup problems. He's very explosive and has a terrific knack for finding a way to get to the football. Steeves is a big, rangy kid who's solid, just perfect in his assignments. He always makes plays.

“They (Raplee and Steeves) bring experience. Both are three-year starters who will help the young linebackers behind them. It really helps (the linebackers) knowing that experience is there, knowing those guys up front will make plays.”

Candidates to join Raplee and Steeves as starters on the line include sophomore tackle **Willie Parker (Livingston Manor, NY/Livingston Manor)**, who saw action in four games as a freshman (six tackles), and junior end **Justin Collen (Averill Park, NY/Averill Park)**, who played in seven contests (one tackle).

Others competing for time on the defensive line include junior ends **Cameron Apt (Rochester, NY/Pittsford Mendon)** and **Fred Langenstein (Pittsford, NY/Pittsford Mendon)** and sophomore tackle **Keith Carrington (Queens Village, NY/St. Francis)**. All three saw time with the junior varsity in 2011. Carrington, in particular, could challenge for a starting spot.

Pressley, one of the team's top tacklers each of the last two seasons (50 in 2011, including four for loss) and a solid defender against the run, is set to move from safety to outside linebacker. He'll be teamed with sophomore **J.R. Britton (Rochester, NY/Greece Arcadia)** at the other outside spot. Competing for the middle linebacker's spot will be junior **Brendan McGinnis (Walworth, NY/Gananda-East Rochester)** and sophomore **Zach Wiley (Marcellus, NY/Marcellus)**.

Britton was a standout on special teams and saw time as a defensive back last year, finishing with 10 tackles and a blocked kick in 10 games played. Murray said the physical and athletic Britton “had a great spring” and could be the team's breakout player on defense this fall. McGinnis played in all 11 games last year and finished with 16 tackles while Wiley played on a pair of varsity games and had one tackle.

Also looking for time at linebacker will be sophomore **Justin Liberta (Hamburg, NY/Frontier)**, who as a freshman

was Clark's backup and finished with 11 tackles in nine games; junior **D.J. Welch (Avon, NY/Avon)**, who had six tackles and a backup defensive back last fall; and sophomore **Davis Turner (South Glens Falls, NY/South Glens Falls)**, who had a solid freshman season on the junior varsity in 2011.

Murray is optimistic that the linebacking corps will grow as the season progresses and ultimately become a strength. "There's a lot of potential in this group. It's very important for them to develop quickly in 25 practices and be ready to play in game one," he said.

Jackson is without doubt the leader of a secondary that, with Pressley's move to linebacker, lost three of four starters. A Second Team all-conference selection in 2011, Jackson had 37 tackles and led the team in interceptions with four (one returned 63 yards for a TD). He also forced a fumble, recovered a fumble and blocked a kick. "We'll count on him to make plays. He's an outstanding, physical player and a good leader," Murray said of Jackson.

Senior **Andy Ruddock (Attica, NY/Attica)**, a solid backup and special teams performer throughout his career, will get his chance to start at strong safety. "He's been a good utility player for us," Murray said of Ruddock, who had four tackles in six games last year. "Now he gets his shot."

Sophomore **Michael Perkins (Rochester, NY/East High)**, a nickelback in 2011, when he had three tackles in six games, will likely start at strongside corner. "He saw limited time last year, but he had a terrific spring. He's very athletic and intelligent and is good in coverage," Murray said.

Competing for the weakside corner spot will be juniors **Zach Kudla (Auburn, NY/Port Byron)**, **Seiji Hinton (Freeport, NY/Freeport)**, **Mykel Ferguson (Rochester, NY/Greece Olympia)** and **Evan Smith (Friendship, NY/Cuba-Rushford)**.

"Our secondary has some inexperience, but we have some upperclass leadership in Jackson and Ruddock, that will help our younger players develop," Murray said.

On offense, AU will rely heavily on a talented pair of tailbacks in junior **Austin Dwyer (Arkport, NY/Hornell)** and senior **Tyler DeRosa (Miller Place, NY/Miller Place)**, as the Saxons welcome a new quarterback in junior transfer **Zach Sopak (Falconer, NY/Southwestern)**.

Dwyer has led the team in rushing each of the last two years. A year after running for a school-record 1,412 yards as a freshman in 2010, he ran for a team-best 981 yards with nine TDs in 2011 and was named a First Team Empire 8 all-star last fall. DeRosa, who transferred from Western Connecticut State before the 2011 season, ran for 634 yards (team-best 5.6 per carry) in his first year in a Saxon uniform. Both are good receivers out of the backfield Dwyer had 15 catches and DeRosa six and are solid in pass blocking.

Murray said either could start when the season opens, but regardless of who is listed first on the depth chart, “both are going to play a lot of football.” He said there will be times when both are in the lineup simultaneously.

“I’m completely comfortable with either,” Murray said. “They’ll keep each other fresh and healthy as the season wears on.”

Competing for time at fullback will be junior **Chuck Beckwith (Victor, NY/Victor)** and sophomore **Dave Jennings (Attica, NY/Attica)**. Beckwith played in seven games as a backup last year and ran for 56 yards.

Sopak, a transfer from Washington & Jefferson, is the frontrunner to take over starting QB duties. Sopak, who played sparingly his first two years at W&J, is a former two-time New York State Class C Player of the Year and First Team state all-star who twice led Southwestern High School (Jamestown area) to state Class C championships (2008 and 2009). Murray said Sopak possesses more mobility than his predecessors, but can also throw the ball well.

“He has a strong arm, a very high football I.Q. and was able to pick up our system very easily in the spring,” Murray commented. “He has an ability to make plays out of broken, unsettled situations, but he’s also very capable of throwing the football effectively.”

A host of underclassmen, including junior **Joe Enslin (Bronx, NY/Mt. St. Michael)** and sophomore **Ben Capeless (Cohoes, NY/Shaker)**, will also compete for time at quarterback behind Sopak.

Alfred’s receiving corps will be solid, led by junior wideout **Josh Phillips (Syracuse, NY/West Genesee)**. A starter since his freshman season, Phillips led the team in catches (42) and receiving yards (650) in 2011. His four TD catches were second to senior tight end **Adam Schutz (Geneva, NY/Geneva)**, who returns after earning Second Team All-Empire 8 honors as a junior last fall, when he caught 38 passes for 437 yards and seven touchdowns.

“Phillips is our go-to guy, the veteran of our wide receiver group,” Murray said. “He has great hands and runs terrific routes.”

Schutz, who plays as much like a slot receiver as a traditional tight end, produces matchup problems for opposing defenses. “He’s an awesome game player. He has outstanding hands and is tremendously competitive. The tight end is really a factor in our passing game, so (Schutz’s production) is huge,” Murray commented.

Other wide receivers competing for time in 2012 will be senior **Nick Spadaro, (Clay, NY/Cicero-North Syracuse)**,

who throughout his career has played behind some talented wideouts or been hampered by injury. With one career catch in five games, he'll have an opportunity to step into a starter's role in this, his final year.

Other Saxons vying for time at wideout include junior **Jonathan Ruffin (Copiague, NY/Copiague)**, a converted quarterback. Junior **Alec Ladonis (Nescopeck, PA/Berwick)** (two catches, 18 yards in 2011) returns as Schutz's backup at tight end.

The Saxons' offensive line returns three of five starters, including all-conference junior left **Ryan DiFlavio (West Seneca, NY/West Seneca West)**. Other returning first-stringers are senior right guard **Harold Spetla (Tupper Lake, NY/Tupper Lake)** and junior left guard **Pat Teta (Avon, NY/Avon)**. The trio played on a line helped the Saxon offense produce 365 yards per game in 2011 while allowing only 13 sacks.

"The offensive line has improved and there is a great deal of potential there, some very good chemistry," Murray said. "We should be very solid with run blocking, because we have two very good tailbacks. Much of (the line's) success will depend on how they perform in pass protection."

Competing for the starting right tackle job are a pair of sophomores **Kyle Woodard (Dundee, NY/Dundee)** and **Dalton Maska (Lockport, NY/Starpoint)** who saw time on the varsity as backups in 2011. Junior **Zach Harrington (Rochester, NY/Greece Olympia)** is the frontrunner to replace 2011 all-Empire 8 pick Tim Demersman at center. Sophomore **Trey Beltrand (Central Islip, NY/Central Islip)** and junior **Joel Rudnick (Rochester, NY/Brighton)** will compete for time on the line as well.

Special teams took a big hit with the graduation of placekicker-punter Eric Rockwood. A four-year starter and three-time all-E8 pick as a kicker and a two-year starting punter, Rockwood left AU holding several single-season and career kicking record.

Juniors **Cody Gustin (Wellsville, NY/Wellsville)** and **Zach Tavolaro (Manlius, NY/Fayetteville-Manlius)** are candidates to take over kicking duties. Senior **Matt Girolmo (Livonia, NY/Livonia)**, a starting punter each of the last two seasons before being supplanted mid-season by Rockwood, will get his chance to start again in 2012.

The return game is solid, with Dwyer headlining the group. In addition to earning First Team all-conference honors as a tailback in 2010 and 2011, Dwyer was also a two-time all-conference pick as a return man. He averaged nearly 23 yards on kick returns in 2011, and had an 85-yard touchdown return against Utica. Jackson and freshman defensive back **Mike Berardi (Wellsville, NY/Wellsville)** could see time returning kicks as well. Dwyer and Phillips enter the season as candidates to return punts.

Murray said special teams will need to improve for the Saxons to succeed. Protection on kicks was a problem in 2011, as four punts and three extra points were blocked. The team had a net punt return average of 6.8 yards, while opponents had a return clip of nearly 13 yards. The Saxons were strong in kickoff coverage, allowing just over 19

yards per return. “There will be an emphasis on improvement in special teams,” Murray commented.

Overall, Murray is optimistic with his team’s chances of reaching their primary goal. He pointed to improvements that must be made on both sides of the ball for that to happen.

He said the defense needs to create more takeaways, as opponents turned the ball over only 20 times last season, compared to 24 miscues by the Saxons. Murray said the Saxons must also improve a defense that allowed opponents to convert on 42 percent of their third down opportunity, while also doing a better job of limiting “big plays” of 25 yards or more.

Murray said much of the burden for the offense’s success will fall on the running game, particularly in the early part of the year.

“Our tailbacks have to make plays for us. When it’s third-and-1, they have to convert for us,” he said. “They need to stay on schedule offensively and help our young quarterback develop. We need to find a way to be balanced and be able to throw the ball” so defenses can’t key on the AU running game.

As much as the defense needs to create more turnovers, the offense needs to limit its miscues. “Turnovers were a problem for us last year; we had too many,” Murray said.

Murray expects big things from his proven players, but added the team will need all players on both sides of the ball to be at their best if the Saxons are to compete for a conference crown.

“I think we have some really good key players returning on both sides of the ball,” he said. “It’s going to be critical for the supporting cast on offense and defense to step up their level of play.”