

# ANOTHER 5-SET THRILLER!

## VB TEAM SURVIVIES AT STATE



**Above:** Joy Evans celebrates Lynden Cole's winning shot from Set 1 which started the Lady Cavs toward victory.



**Above:** After Deonna Cole's clinching point, the team piles on her and others at center court.

### By Ron Barry

If you've watched much Crockett County volleyball this season, you've probably been impressed by how cool and poised sophomore hitter Deonna Cole appears on the floor.

But if what she said after Wednesday's five-set TSSAA State Tournament win over Upperman High School is to be believed, then she should be handed the Oscar for Best Actress right now.

"I was terrified!"

That's how Cole described her emotions as she perfectly placed a touch shot down the left sideline to clinch the Lady Cavaliers' heart-stopping 15-13 triumph, keeping Crockett's hopes alive in Murfreesboro after winning a five-setter for the fifth time this season without a loss.

"It looks like if we can get a team to a fifth set, we've got 'em where we want 'em!" laughed a very relieved assistant coach Hope Owens.

Overall, Crockett is now 33-9 and heads into a Thursday morning showdown at 9:30 with Anderson County, which beat Dyer County 3-1 in the opening round before falling to Creek Wood 3-0 Wednesday. Ironically, Dyer County – a team which has beaten the Lady Cavaliers four times this season, including the district and region championship games – has already been bounced from the State event, falling to Volunteer High 3-1 Wednesday.

Coach Bobby Rawson's Lady Cavaliers are now assured of at least a fifth-place finish, matching the school's best showing (twice) in State tournament play. If Crockett can somehow get past Anderson County, it will play again at 5:00 Thursday evening against the winner of Valor Collegiate Prep and Volunteer, who play at noon.

Cole, who earlier in Set 5 had given the Lady Cavs a 6-4 lead with a strong kill shot, rotated back into the front line just in time to face a 13-13 tie, meaning that both teams were two points away from tournament elimination. But senior Sarah Cherry tipped a winner over Upperman blockers on the right side of the court to push Crockett ahead 14-13, and then stepped to the service line to try to end the match.

Cherry's serve was returned and the ball eventually floated into Cole's area on the left. With two blockers leaping in front of her, she guided the ball just over their fingertips and into the unprotected area behind them, igniting a loud cheer from the Lady Cav fans, screams of "She carried it!" from the Upperman contingent, and a center-court dogpile which buried her underneath.

"When I saw the ball coming toward me, I just wanted to hit it back over," Cole said. "I was terrified! I didn't really think about anything else."

The shot was a perfect ending for Crockett fans and Coach Rawson, who watched his club play extremely well in winning the first two sets 25-22 (scoring 11 of the last 15 points) and 25-20 (the final point coming on an ace by Brooklyn Haynes). But Upperman clawed back by ramping up its service game and going on a mid-set run to claim Set 3 by a 25-19 count. Set 4 was similar, with Upperman prevailing 25-17, and suddenly what had seemed like a promising afternoon was now up for questioning again.

A winner by Cherry gave Crockett an early 5-4 lead, followed by Cole's first kill of the set. The Lady Cavs eventually built a 9-5 edge, but a service error let Upperman back into the picture. A couple of well-placed tip shots by sophomore Katherine West gave Crockett a 12-10 lead, but it was soon 12-12 and then 13-13 until Cherry and Cole combined to close it out.

"To God be the glory," Rawson said after the match, reviewing his teams' State tournament history in his mind. "The first few times we got here we didn't win a game. Sometimes when that happens you feel like you don't belong. But then we finally broke through in 2019. We don't come from a place where you have a dozen club or travel teams to choose from, and that's who we were losing to. So when we finally won a game, I felt like we showed everybody that we're not just some small-town bumpkins who got here by mistake."

Rawson was extremely proud of his Lady Cavaliers Wednesday.

"There may be better teams here than us," he said, "but there is no team that is more prayed-over than this one. These are terrific girls, and now they have a platform for another day in Murfreesboro. I'm blessed to coach them."

Rawson felt his squad's service returns were much better than in the loss to Valor the previous day. Haynes, Lynden Cole, Brennan Morris, and Kinleigh Lamb did most of the heavy lifting on that end, with Bailey Ann Whitby setting the table for hitters Cherry, Deonna Cole, Joy Evans, West, and Keeton Holyfield.

"This team doesn't give up, and we weren't ready to quit today," Cherry said.

The Thursday schedule:

9:30 – Crockett vs. Anderson County

Noon – Valor vs. Volunteer

2:30 – Creek Wood vs. Signal Mountain (winners bracket final)

5:00 – Winners of the 9:30 and noon games

7:30 – Loser of the 2:30 game vs. Winner of the 5:00 game

All Class AA games are being played at Blackman High through Thursday. Championship games in all three TSSAA volleyball classes will be at Siegel High School on Friday.

**Right:** A Katherine West tip shot for a winner elicited this response: (from left) West, Keeton Holyfield (16), Bailey Ann Whitby (13), Deonna Cole (14), and Kinleigh Lamb (5).



**Below:** Deonna Cole gets a post-match hug from Liv Owens, daughter of assistant coach Hope Owens.



**Above** This shot looks like the ghost of Bailey Ann Whitby is haunting Keeton Holyfield (16), but it's actually just Whitby much closer to the camera and not in the focused area.



**Left:** Seniors Whitby and Sarah Cherry (8) share a laugh after a Crockett point.

**Below:** Lynden Cole goes down low to dig this Upperman serve.



**Below:** Senior hitter Joy Evans wants to eat after stuffing an Upperman kill attempt.



**Right:** Brooklyn Haynes (1, in the circle) clinched the second set with a service ace.

**Left:** Sarah Cherry's touch shot over the blockers gave Crockett a 14-13 lead in the final set.

