

RAWSON, LAMAN TO SWAP COACHING POSITIONS



Above: Bobby Rawson jokes with senior All-Region player Joy Evans.



Above: At the Region Tournament championship, Rawson tries to fire up his Lady Cavs during a timeout.

By Ron Barry

Bobby Rawson is stepping back – not out, just back.

Crockett County's legendary volleyball coach – the winningest mentor in West Tennessee history, with 678 victories in 26 years during his tenure – has announced that he will be switching leadership roles with his assistant of eight years, Andrew Laman, in the 2024 season. He's not retiring, and he's not abandoning the program. He just feels it's time for Laman to take the wheel and steer the ship.

"Andrew deserves this opportunity," Rawson said Monday afternoon. "He's earned it. He knows the program, he knows the players, and he'll keep everything going in the right direction. I'm sticking around to provide whatever help I can, and I'll do whatever he asks me. But it's time for me to give up the day-to-day details."

In his 26 years at the helm, Rawson has led Crockett County to 10 district championships, four region titles, and nine trips to the TSSAA State Tournament. He's had eight 30+-win seasons, including the last three – so it's not like the program has been sliding backward.

"I look at it kind of like the Seinfeld show," Rawson said. "I saw him interviewed once when he announced the last season of Seinfeld was about to take place. It was still the number one show on television at the time. And he said, 'I don't want to be that guy that has to be told it's time to leave. I'd rather go out when we're still on top.' I want to turn this program over to Andrew while it's still strong."

As he reminisced on his career Monday, while emotional at times, the thoughts of what he's experienced were mostly bringing a peaceful smile to his face.

Rawson came to Crockett County in 1997 in the most unusual of circumstances. He'd graduated from Freed-Hardeman University with a mathematics degree, and he was looking for an opportunity to teach that subject and also coach baseball, his first sporting love. He and his wife Wendy both had offers to go to Tipton County, but Rawson was a little uncomfortable with what he saw in his potential starting point.

"They kind of made me a vague offer, and I had this feeling of being stuck out in a mobile set-up behind the actual school building without any clear direction as to exactly what I'd be doing," he said. "But then I got a more solid offer from Jackson Christian School, with a decision date of the following Friday."

But before the week was over, another inquiry came his way. He got a call from Crockett's Dan Black, who invited him for an interview.

"I came and sat outside his office for about 30 minutes while he dealt with all kinds of problems," Rawson laughed. "Suddenly he comes out and says, 'I gotta get out of here for a while! Let's go!,' and we hopped in his truck and he drove me all around Crockett County for more than two hours, running errands and introducing me to people. We didn't talk about anything that was school-related."

"When we got back to the school, he parked the truck and just said, 'Well, do you want the job or not?' I said, 'We haven't even had the interview yet!' and he said, 'We just did! Do you want the job or not?'"

Rawson asked if he could let him know by Monday, then called JCS and asked them if he could have until Monday to decide on their offer. After they agreed, he told Wendy everything that had happened and they began to pray about it.

"The gist of the prayer was, 'Lord, just show us where you can best use us.' And here I am. So when people ask me how I got to Crockett County, I tell them it was Dan Black and God – and not in that order!"

He began his first year at this new school teaching mathematics classes and getting ready to coach baseball, cutting the grass on the field in the fall as he was settling in. Then a new development arose.

"I had a geometry class that had several volleyball players in it," he said. "They all had big personalities, so they talked a lot about the team but were concerned because a new coach had been hired, and they weren't sure if she was going to be the right fit."

The coach had actually been hired to lead the softball program, and the volleyball thing had been a late addition to her plate. It turns out she knew almost nothing about the sport.

"The girls in the geometry class knew I was a coach and starting asking me if I knew anything about volleyball," Rawson said. "I told them I enjoyed playing it at church camp and I had taken a class on it at FHU, but that I didn't really know a lot about it. But that was enough for them. When the bell rang, they were off and running, and the next thing I knew the softball coach was knocking on my door and asking me if I'd help her coach the team, because she honestly didn't know what she was doing."

Rawson, who doesn't do anything half-way, began calling coaching friends who sent him videos of the U.S. Olympic national team. The videos showed strategies that were completely different from what Crockett's volleyballers had experienced before, but Rawson told them, "Well, this is the way the Olympic team does it, so this is the way we're going to do it!"

The following year - 1998 - Rawson was elevated to head volleyball coach, in addition to his baseball duties and math classes. In his first year leading his new sport team, the Lady Cavaliers went all the way to the State Tournament - where they were promptly smoked by Anderson County.

"I think the score was 15-0 and 15-1," Rawson said, "and I honestly can't remember how we even scored the one point - if we even did. They destroyed us - embarrassed us completely. But I still remember the feeling I had walking up that tunnel in the Murphy Center at MTSU with the team, and entering the big stage. I even thought about how neat it would be if at the end of my career, I could exit a place like that knowing that the program I had led had shown everyone there that we belonged."

Fast forward to 2023. Crockett gave Anderson County - an East Tennessee powerhouse with a substantial history of State Tournament success - all it could handle before falling in four highly competitive sets.

Rawson's teams won district titles in his first seven years at the Lady Cav helm, and then captured their first region crown in 2005 on their way to State Tournament appearance number three. His squads would make three additional trips in the next seven years - but still without winning a single match at the State.

Finally, in 2019 - with his winningest team ever (35-14) - Crockett broke into the win column and finished fifth at the State, a feat it has matched twice more since, including this season.

And, during this season, Rawson's overall record of 678-288 made him the most victorious volleyball coach in West Tennessee history, surpassing Jackson South Side's Tommy Dean.

"I have been extremely blessed," said Rawson, who is also the minister at Alamo Church of Christ. "But John Wooden (former UCLA basketball coaching legend) was right: you have to have great players to achieve this kind of success, and we have had great players come through this program at Crockett."

It is the memory of those players that gives Rawson his greatest pleasure as he looks back. "The relationships are what mean the most to me," he said. "I get texts from former players all the time. I've baptized some of them, done some of their weddings, and even a funeral. I used to be able to tell you scores of matches and things like that, but over time it's become the thoughts of the players that I hold most closely. As I said, I've been extremely blessed."

As has Crockett County with his presence. And it will continue to be blessed - just from another spot on the bench.



Above: Nine State Tournament appearances; 10 District championships; four Region titles; 678 wins in 26 years: Bobby Rawson.



Above: Andrew Laman will be Crockett's head volleyball coach next fall - with a new impressive assistant helping him out.