

VOLLEYBALL TEAM FIGHTS TO STAY ALIVE WEDNESDAY



Above: Sadie Hoover (inside the circle) gets the celebratory "Ace Dance" after serving to give Crockett an 11-5 lead in Set 1.



Above: Sarah Cherry's set 1 winning point ignites a wild reaction from her teammates: (left to right) Katherine West (3), Keeton Holyfield (16), Cherry (8), Lynden Cole (10), Bailey Ann Whitby (crouched), and Brooklyn Haynes.

By Ron Barry

Home to the Blackman High Blaze, the gymnasium at the Murfreesboro school is nicknamed "The Furnace."

It was highly appropriate Tuesday afternoon in the opening round of the TSSAA State Volleyball Tournament, because the serves from Valor Collegiate Prep were totally too hot for Crockett County to handle.

"It was that simple," said Lady Cavalier Coach Bobby Rawson after the match. "Their serving was much, much better than our returning."

Valor – a school out of Nashville – downed Crockett 23-25, 25-22, 25-14, and 25-15, going on a roll after the first set by shedding its nerves and going for broke on almost every possession thereafter. The high-risk, high-reward approach paid off for the victors, who rode the amazing play of spectacular eighth-grader Anarela Mejias to advance to a Wednesday morning winners bracket match with Signal Mountain.

Meanwhile, Crockett drops into the losers bracket and will face Upperman at 2:30, again at Blackman High.

"Their serves kept us completely off balance the last three sets," Rawson said. "If we made a good return bump that we could set and then hit, we'd score. But the good bumps were few and far between. It was definitely the difference in the match."

Assistant coach Andrew Laman echoed Rawson's assessment. "When we get beat, that's usually the reason," he said. "It hasn't happened often – we are 32-9, after all – but when we've shown a weakness in a match, it's been the return game."

But Rawson was quick to point out to his team that, since this is a double-elimination tournament, Wednesday is another day to show the type of play the Lady Cavs have demonstrated all season.

"I told them that no dreams they had on Tuesday have been taken out of play for Wednesday," he said. "We're still in the tournament. We have another game. And if we play well, we'll get to keep playing another day or two."

Both teams were noticeably nervous at the start of Tuesday's match, but Crockett settled down quickly and took a 6-1 advantage after a Sarah Cherry kill shot. A well-placed Joy Evans touch shot and a service ace by Sadie Hoover forced a Valor timeout with the Lady Cavs up 11-5.

Crockett's lead grew to seven points at 13-6 when things began to go south. Suddenly Valor had pulled into a 13-all tie, and the contest stayed deadlocked or separated by just one point until a Deonna Cole kill pushed the Lady Cavs up 21-19.

That edge was short-lived, however, as Valor took its first lead by scoring the next three points. But on the ensuing serve, Kinleigh Lamb made an acrobatic dig and Katherine West turned it into a deft touch shot, perfectly placed in an open spot, to tie things up again at 22-all.

Crockett shakily held on to finish the first set out, with another Cherry blast closing the deal at 25-23. At that point, Lady Cav fans were hoping the nerves had settled and the relief of winning the opening set would free Crockett's senior-laden club to play its game.

"But it was Valor that appeared to play more freely after Set 1. Hammering serve after serve – even though some went into the net and some long out of bounds – the Nashville squad kept going for broke on virtually every point while Crockett players seemed uncharacteristically tentative much of the time.

Meanwhile, Valor – making superb passes to set up kills on the vast majority of its possessions – started directing the sets toward Mejias at every opportunity. The talented eighth-grader – who can, and will, slam the ball from just about anywhere on the court – threw caution to the wind and began to do just that. There was little Crockett could do to counteract the barrage.

Even though the Lady Cavs actually pulled within 24-22 before dropping Set 2, the final couple of sets were never close. Valor won Set 3 by 11. Then, after Crockett scored the first point of Set 4, the Nashville school chalked up the next 10 on the scoreboard before the Lady Cavs could break through again. In the end, it was a 10-point Valor triumph.

Crockett has been a resilient team all season, and will be tested by Upperman on Wednesday. But, as Laman also said when he referenced the Lady Cavs' 32-9 record, "We're here for a reason. There aren't any bad teams at the State tournament."

"We just need to play our game," Rawson said. "We've done it all year. We can do it again."

Right: Sarah Cherry (8) runs down a service return that's headed way out of bounds, but she saved it and kept the point alive for the Lady Cavs.

Below: Bailey Ann Whitby (13) bumps a pass to Joy Evans (25).

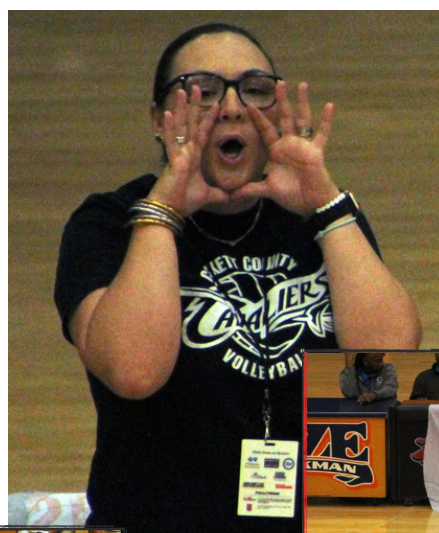


Above Brooklyn Haynes prepares her first State Tournament serve.



Left: Assistant coach Hope Owens shouts encouragement.

Below: Katherine West (3) belts a shot past a Valor blocker in Set 2 of Tuesday's match.



Below: Sarah Cherry blasts the winning point for a 25-23 Set 1 victory for Crockett...



Right: Lynden Cole (10) goes way down to dig a service return for Crockett.

Left: Lily Riley and Kinleigh Lamb try to boost the spirits along the sidelines.

