

5-SET THRILLER SENDS VOLLEYBALLERS TO STATE TOURNAMENT



Above: Evans, West, Morris, Cherry, and Haynes hug it out at the end.



Above: Headed for Murfreesboro...

By Ron Barry

Holding her thumb and forefinger just a fraction of an inch apart, Joy Evans said, "We've been THIS close my first three years in high school. But now we've MADE it!"

Crockett County's thoughtful senior middle hitter described the elation of Thursday night's Class-AA Sectional five-set victory over host Covington, a win that sends the Lady Cavaliers to the TSSAA State Tournament next week in Murfreesboro. But her fingers also described the "by-the-skin-of-your-teeth" margin that got them there.

The Lady Chargers – a team Crockett defeated in straight sets during the regular season – came out fired up and supported by an enthusiastic student section and determined for revenge, and seemed well on their way to making that happen when they erased a six-point deficit to swing the momentum back in their favor in Set 4.

But Coach Bobby Rawson's senior-laden squad – resilient all season long – pulled everything back together for the deciding Set 5, pounding its way to a 15-5 triumph.

Evans credited the win and the team's season success to the leadership of her fellow seniors and a team chemistry that embraces the positive and deflects the negative.

"This team's seniors have created an atmosphere in which everyone is supported and any negativity is diverted," she said. "And that atmosphere allows the team to rise, and it lifts every individual player with it. Tonight it allowed the sophomores to rise."

Girl, did it EVER.

Without the outstanding efforts of three Crockett sophs who often found themselves together on the front line, the Lady Cav seniors might have seen their careers come crashing to a disappointing halt Thursday night.

Deonna Cole, Katherine West, and Keeton Holyfield played consistently and effectively throughout the match. In fact, it was a deftly placed touch shot by West that wrapped up Crockett's 25-23 Set 2 win, and a similar maneuver by Holyfield that clinched the 25-20 Set 3 victory. Cole, for her part, was slamming winners all night long.

But Covington gave Crockett's service returners fits all night long as well, moving the ball around both short and deep and corner to corner, often leaving the Lady Cav back line frustrated. Rawson's bunch hung in there, though – as they have through several five-setters this season – and finally dominated the deciding set by latching onto control of their own service game, negating Covington's strength.

Before then, Rawson said, he was having his own struggle with "trust" issues before settling on the message he delivered prior to Set 5.

"Covington was finding every hole on the court," he said. "If we were back, they'd hit it short. If we slid toward the middle, they'd hit a corner. They had shots falling off the net tape, touch shots just barely getting over our blockers, and kill shots that would barely graze our fingers before landing out. I was becoming my 'whiny' self over here on the sideline, wondering when we were going to get a break." But Rawson – the winningest coach in West Tennessee volleyball history – settled himself and his team with the message that sometimes you just have to trust in God when everything seems to be chaos around you.

"I know it's a spiritual message, but I also believe it's true," he said. "Once we put our trust back where it belongs, we settled down and got the job done. And now these girls have a memory for a lifetime and a platform they can use to teach others about trust."

That platform expands with next week's State Tournament in Murfreesboro, which will be held Tuesday through Friday at Blackman, Siegel, and Rockvale high schools. It will be a double-elimination affair, with the championship games set for Friday. Tennessee has three class levels playing volleyball, and the tournaments run simultaneously.

Crockett almost didn't get there, trailing past the midway point in each of the first four sets. Covington won the first 25-22 and was leading the second 17-16 when an Evans winner tied it and a block stuff by West triggered a four-point run for the Lady Cavs. The hosts pulled within 24-23, but West's gentle tap over a center double-block ended it in Crockett's favor.

In Set 3, Covington held a 13-12 advantage midway through, but the Lady Cavs reeled off seven unanswered points for a 19-13 edge and then won it 25-20 when Holyfield found a hole down the right sideline and softly steered the ball to it, eluding the Lady Charger defenders. Crockett seemed to settle down at the beginning of Set 4, storming to a quick 14-8 advantage until Covington's servers amped up their game again. Soon it was 18-18, then 20-20, then 23-all. Evans cranked a kill shot with her trademark "boom," and the Lady Cavs were a point away from Murfreesboro.

Covington scored the next three to steal it 26-24, and now it was down to the first team to reach 15 points in Set 5.

The first portion of the final set belonged to Crockett's veterans. Aces by servers Brennan Morris and Brooklyn Haynes and a kill by Evans pushed the Lady Cavs up 8-1. Another kill by Sarah Cherry - a standout in Set 5 - got it to 10-1, and another well-placed touch by West made it 11-1. After a brief Charger rally, West peppered a kill shot to make it 13-4.

Following an exchange of points, junior Sadie Hoover took the ball for Crockett, serving at 14-5. It was returned, but senior Lynden Cole kept it alive and, after a Bailey Ann Whitby set, Deonna Cole sent it over the net. Covington hammered it back, but senior Kinleigh Lamb dug it to keep it in the air, and Evans did the same with a lunge to the floor. Dee Cole actually stepped over Evans to then get it back over to Covington.

It came back again, but a leaping Evans tipped it right back. The Lady Chargers sent it over one more time, but Lamb passed it to Whitby, who set it to Evans. Seeing the blockers gather before her, the talented senior used her left hand to poke it toward the left front corner. A diving defender popped it back up toward the net, but it rebounded off the tape to another flailing Charger. Her effort sent the ball into the stands, and the Crockett celebration was on.

"This team's chemistry is something special," Evans said. "It's better than I've ever seen it since I've been here. And it's the reason we're still playing."

Crockett, now 32-8, joins Volunteer High, Anderson County, Signal Mountain, Upperman, Valor Collegiate, fellow district foe Dyer County, and either Creek Wood or White House Heritage in the Class-AA State field. Here's hoping it's just another chemistry class for Evans and her teammates.



Left: Lynden Cole says, "Let's stretch this out to 5 sets!"



Above: Sophomore Deonna Cole helped keep the Lady Cavaliers in it until all cylinders kicked in.



Left: Assistant coach Hope Owens holds a fan to try to keep Brennan Morris (11) and Katherine West (3) from overheating.

Below: Sarah Cherry and Brooklyn Haynes celebrate a winner as their teammates applaud in the background.



Above: Sophomore Keeton Holyfield - surrounded by seniors - is congratulated for a winning point, illustrating the chemistry on this team.

Right: Katherine West's reaction after this winner was a classic.





Above: Coach Bobby Rawson had to overcome his "whiny self," but the trust message finally came through.

Below: Close matches bring out the beast in Bailey Ann Whitby.



Right: Senior Joy Evans uses her off-hand to tap the final shot of Crockett's 5-set victory.

Below: An emphatic Joy Evans congratulates senior Kinleigh Lamb (5) for an extraordinarily athletic dig to keep a point alive.



Above: Incoming! Sarah Cherry has to duck out of the way as Joy Evans (25) and Lynden Cole (10) celebrate a point.

Left: As soon as the final point was recorded, sophomore Keeton Holyfield (16) went airborne.



Left: Teammates rushed the floor, surrounded the collapsed Bailey Ann Whitby.

Below: The flood continues...



Below: Finally it's one pile.



Above: Ecstatic senior Sarah Cherry (center) fires up her teammates after clinching a state tournament berth.



Left: This shot of Deonna Cole says it all - let's go to Murfreesboro!