

VB TEAM EARNS BERTH IN REGIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP & WEST SECTIONAL



Above: A happy Deonna Cole (14), slaps hands with Bailey Ann Whitby and Katherine West.



Above: After Crockett broke open Set 1 on a key service ace, the bench erupts: (from left) Lily Riley (4), Kinleigh Lamb (5), Jiorgia Elmore (21), Kylee Garrett (22), Deonna Cole (14), Keeton Holyfield (16), Khaki Hail (20), and Madi Collins (6).

By Ron Barry

Every school would love for its students to learn the value of serving.

It might help you win a few volleyball matches too.

In Monday night's Region 7-AA Tournament semifinals, Crockett County's volleyball team rode the strength of a solid service game to fly past Lakeland Preparatory School 3-0 in straight sets to secure a berth in the event's championship game tonight at Dyer County. More importantly - regardless of tonight's outcome - Coach Bobby Rawson's Lady Cavaliers (now 31-7) advance to Thursday night's West Sectional against either Covington or Millington at a site to be determined by the result of tonight's games.

Tonight's regional championship match in Newbern will be the fourth meeting of the season between Crockett and undefeated Dyer County (now 13-0). The host Lady Choctaws have dropped only a single set all year (to the Lady Cavs), and sailed past Bolivar Central in their regional semifinal 25-5, 25-7, and 25-8.

Rawson's squad faced a young but talented Lakeland Prep club that doesn't have a single player past the sophomore level. But the Lady Lions put up a battle in the first set, trailing only 19-17 before Crockett tallied the final six points for a 25-17 triumph.

The second set was much more lopsided. The Lady Cavs jumped to leads of 10-2 and 22-9 before closing out the Lakeland team 25-11 in such controlling fashion that Prep coach Avrey Stevens never even used a timeout.

The third set was a different story, however. Lakeland actually held a 16-12 advantage until a Sadie Hoover service ace pushed Crockett in front 19-18. Joy Evans took over from there, blasting a kill for a 20-18 edge and then deftly placing a touch spot into an open area to put the Lady Cavs up 21-18.

Lakeland narrowed the gap to 21-20, but two effective Lynden Cole serves moved Crockett back out to a 23-20 advantage. Another Evans blast and a final point kill by Sarah Cherry gave the Lady Cavs a 25-22 win and a sweep of the match.

"Our service game was definitely the difference tonight," Rawson said after the contest. "We were solid with it all night and it kept them from making enough effective sets to hurt us. I thought before the match that although Lakeland is very skilled, their youth compared to our experience would give us an edge. If we didn't let our nerves get to us, I felt we would be all right."

The first set stayed close until Rawson had a conversation with Cherry on the bench during a rotation in which the senior hitter had come out of the game. Cherry had missed on a few early touch shots that went wide, but was a different player after the talk.

"I just told her that their blockers wouldn't be able to stop the hard stuff," he said. "Sarah was trying to hit it around blockers that really weren't going to affect her shots, so I just told her to swing away."

Cherry did - very successfully from that point on - as did Evans, Deonna Cole, and Katherine West, who played one of her better games of the season.

But it was the consistency and pace of Crockett's service game that made the major difference in this one. Brennan Morris, Bailey Ann Whitby, Brooklyn Haynes, Cherry, Lynden Cole, and Hoover all made significant impacts at one point or another with their serves, and Rawson said it allowed Crockett to keep up a pace that helped the Lady Cavs get into a rhythm that helped the other phases of the game.

Tonight's duel with Dyer County is set for 6:00 in Newbern. If the Lady Cavs can pull a stunner, they'll host a Sectional (formerly called Substate) match Thursday against Region 8's second-place team. If Crockett loses tonight, they'll travel to the home of the Region 8 champion on Thursday.

"Survive and advance," Rawson smiled. "It's that time of year."



Above: Sarah Cherry (8) was all smiles.



Below: When Brooklyn Haynes is smiling, things are going well for the Lady Cavs.



Above: An ace by Sadie Hoover (2) earns her the middle spot in the ace dance, flanked by (from left) Joy Evans, Keeton Holyfield, Deonna Cole (14), Bailey Ann Whitby, and Kinleigh Lamb (5). Cheering in the background are Brennan Morris (11), Jiorgia Elmore (21), Lily Riley (4), and Sarah Cherry (8).



Above: Joy Evans blasts a kill between the hands of two Lakeland Prep blockers...

Below: After a kill, Joy appears to be answering the question, "Who just did that?"



Left: Brooklyn Haynes wasn't the only one smiling. Lynden Cole (10) had her share of laughs...



Left: Following a blistering ace, server Brennan Morris (11) shows everyone her hot hand.



Above: Bailey Ann Whitby (13) is excited about a kill shot made by Katherine West (at left), joined by Deonna Cole (14), Keeton Holyfield, Kinleigh Lamb, and Brooklyn Haynes.

