

# LYNDEN COLE SIGNS WITH PENSACOLA STATE TO CONTINUE SOFTBALL CAREER



**Above:** The table display in front of the theater at Cole's signing ceremony.



**Above:** Cole's family and her softball teammates as the 2024 season is just around the corner.

## By Ron Barry

If you'd like to step up and say something good about Lynden Cole, the line forms to the right at Crockett County High School and extends for 493 miles to Pensacola, Florida.

At least it seemed that way Thursday night when the constantly upbeat Crockett senior signed an athletic grant-in-aid with Pensacola State College to continue her softball career while a large and enthusiastic gathering of her supporters expressed their approval in the high school's theater.

Athletes who receive full athletic scholarships are rare. Rarer still would be to find one more popular among her peers than Cole, who is affectionately known as "Lou" to her family and teammates.

As Cole signed her grant, the theater was filled with current softball teammates, current volleyball teammates, current and former travel softball teammates, her elementary teachers and principal, school administrators, and many other friends and family. The words spoken on her behalf painted a picture of an athlete best described as "a coach's dream."

In fact, CCHS softball coach David Barker used those exact words, among others.

"When the best players on your team are also the hardest workers, it's a coach's dream," Barker said, "and Lynden certainly fits that category. Some players dream about having success; Lynden makes success happen. She is a natural leader who has taken us from being a team to being a true program. She lifted everybody last year to believing we could be more than just a decent team, and sure enough, she led us to the State Tournament."

No Crockett softball team had ever made it into a TSSAA Sectional before, but Cole's walk-off grand slam against Ripley kept the Lady Cavalier dream alive and catapulted Barker's club on a run that took them all the way to the State, where "Lou" delivered a walk-off single to produce Crockett's first-ever State victory in a 2-1 decision over Volunteer High.

"The big moments don't faze Lynden," Barker said, "and it's that persistence she plays with that is so contagious to the rest of the team. It says something that she was our team captain as a junior."

Barker wasn't the only one singing Cole's praises Thursday night. Her Mississippi Glory travel ball coach Jim Lewis - currently the softball coach at Fayette Academy - called her "the best catcher I've ever coached in 16 years." Lewis was also confident of one other thing: "In a year or two we'll be doing this again as Lynden signs with a Power D-1 university."

Both Barker and Lewis feel the only reason Cole isn't signing with a D-1 school right now is because of the COVID-19 pandemic that threw her early high school years into turmoil and disrupted schedules of both high schools and travel teams. But Pensacola personnel saw her in a travel tournament that Glory was playing in, and it led to Thursday's signing.

"At this point I think going JuCo (the junior college route) gives me the best chance of getting to a larger program later on," Cole said. "Pensacola plays a really good schedule and gets good exposure. So if I can prove myself there, I hope it will lead to my goal of playing for a big D-1 school."

Cole, voted unanimously as the Catcher of the Year in Crockett's region last year, has the tools - and the statistics - to back up her intentions. As a junior in 2022, she batted .473 (52 for 110) with seven home runs, 16 doubles, a triple, and 47 runs batted in. She posted an on-base percentage of .525, a slugging percentage (total bases / at-bats) of .827, and an OPS (on-base + slugging) of an incredible 1.352. For those uninitiated in similar stats, those numbers would leave Shohei Ohtani or Ronald Acuna Jr in her dust.

“She notices umpire tendencies and batter positioning when she’s catching,” Barker said, “and while we have a set game plan for pitching because of our scouting reports, she could call a game herself if we let her. Every once in a while I’ll call for a pitch and she’ll look over at me and just shake her head, going, ‘No, let’s not do that one right now!’ We trust her.”

So do her teammates. Perhaps her biggest booster is one of her best friends, volleyball teammate and softball outfielder Brooklyn Haynes.

“She’s just FUN,” Haynes laughed. “She’s a natural leader. She just makes everybody comfortable and ready to play. She lifts everybody she comes into contact with. And as a catcher, she’s just GOOD! Other teams don’t mess with her.”

A unique perspective comes from Deonna Cole, an outstanding sophomore athlete herself at Crockett. She’s not only Lou’s teammate, she’s her actual sister. So is there any difference between the sister and the teammate Lou?

“No, not a bit,” Deonna said. “She’s just an amazing person. She’s the same all the time.” Lou cited the walk-off grand slam against Ripley as the probable highlight of her career thus far, but named two other favorite moments as well.

“As a team, it would be watching this group start believing last year that we could achieve something special,” she said. “I think people started working harder and getting more confident as we went along, and that was great to see. Individually, besides the grand slam, there was a girl from Dyersburg that actually flipped off our crowd – she did the same thing in volleyball too – and I hit two home runs off her, so that was fun.”

At Pensacola State, Cole will be playing for Coach Lyndsey Angus, a former three-time All-SEC selection while at Kentucky. Angus led the SEC in hitting in 2003 with a .429 average and played six years in the National Pro Fastpitch League, where she was named Most Valuable Player in 2006. PSC had a 33-16 record in 2022.

Lou is the daughter of Kimberly and Alan Cole of Gadsden. She’ll be taking the field for her senior season in just a few months.



**Left:** Lynden Cole at the plate.

**Below:** One of Cole’s strengths: Getting a teammate to crack a smile. Here she gets Sarah Cherry in the regional semifinals.



**Above:** Flanked by her family, Cole signs the grant-in-aid from Pensacola State College

**Right:** “Lou” was a mainstay on the State Tournament volleyball team.

**Below:** As a teammate, Cole’s the one in the middle of everything, keeping the others loose.



**Left:** Softball coach David Barker counts off some of Cole’s contributions to the State Tournament team prior to her signing