

STRONG OUTING FROM STALLINGS BRINGS LADY CAVS SEASON OPENING WIN



Above: Crockett sophomore Anna Stallings prepares to deliver another strike while third baseman Madison Solis readies her position.

By Ron Barry

Sophomore hurler Anna Stallings called it one of the better games she's ever pitched. Senior catcher Lynden Cole said Stallings had everything working for her.

And Crockett County softball coach David Barker called it "a typical season opener - except maybe for Anna."

The Lady Cavaliers initiated their 2024 campaign with a 7-1 triumph over highly-regarded McNairy Central at Union University Monday night. After a somewhat slow start, Crockett showed some of the promise that carried the Lady Cavs to their first TSSAA State Tournament in history last season.

Much of that promise is in the right arm of Stallings, who gave up a leadoff home run to McNairy's Bailee Shelton and then shut the Lady Bobcats down almost completely the rest of the game, striking out 12 without issuing a single walk. Her ability to stay ahead of the McNairy hitters in the count all night is the fulfillment of what Barker says they preach to the entire pitching staff.

"Our philosophy is after three pitches to each batter, you ought to have two strikes on her," Barker said. "Anna pretty much did that all night, and that's about all you can ask of your pitcher."

Cole, Crockett's team leader and one of the best defensive catchers in the state - she'll be bound for Florida's Pensacola State College when the season is over - was thrilled with Stallings' 2024 debut.

"Anna has such a poker face on the mound," she said, "so you never really know what she's thinking. But I've caught her often enough to tell what's going through her mind. We communicate well based on how the umpire is calling that game or where the batter is standing in the box. Anna isn't the fastest pitcher compared to some others, but she puts really good spin on the ball and she knows when to make it break.

"Tonight, the umpire wasn't really calling anything low for a strike, so we just started working the corners and getting the ball up in the zone," Cole said. "Once they started at the high ones, we knew we were going to be in good shape."

Barker's concerns about the opener being "typical" mostly came from a shaky first inning defensively and his team's slow start at the plate. Although Crockett scratched out a run in the top of the first when speedy shortstop Piper White beat out a slapped grounder to third, stole second, moved to third on a groundout by Kinleigh Lamb, and came home on a passed ball, it took a while for the normally potent Crockett offense to get cooking.

McNairy tied it immediately in the bottom of the first when leadoff hitter Shelton belted an 0-2 pitch over the right-center field fence on a pitch Cole said "just sort of hung up there." Stallings then pitched her way around a couple of throwing errors after that to escape the first, and then things started flowing more smoothly for the Lady Cavs.

Stallings led off the top of the third with a line-drive single to right and took second on an outfield misplay. Gabby Bursey came in as a courtesy runner for her, and took third on a wild pitch. Two outs later, with Bursey still on third, Lamb smashed a hard base hit through the right side to chase her home and break the 1-1 deadlock.

Crockett escaped a potential McNairy rally in the fourth when, with a runner on first, Lady Cav first sacker Jayden Maddox made a tough backhand grab of a hard grounder toward the right side, and second baseman Lamb had the presence of mind - and the speed - to get over to first base and take a throw from Maddox to beat the runner and end the frame.

Crockett gained some breathing room in the top of the fifth when Stallings walked and courtesy runner Bursey stole second. Hannah Carter then walked and both runners pulled off a double steal to get in scoring position. White then put her usual slap swing on hold, stayed back in the box, and ripped a hard single to right field to make it 4-1, Lady Cavs. It went to 5-1 on a sacrifice fly by Maddox.

McNairy missed another scoring threat in its fifth when Shelton pulled another long hit into the right field gap, but Crockett outfielder Sadie Hoover speedily cut it off and fired it back into the infield to hold her to a single. Stallings pitched around the rest of the inning to keep it at 5-1.

The Lady Cavs added another tally in the top of the sixth when Karly Pigue singled, took second on a passed ball, moved to third on a Stallings groundout, and scored on a passed ball.

Crockett's final run came in the top of the seventh when Cole - who said "the ball has looked huge all night, but I just haven't hit it!" - slammed a long double off the right field wall. Brooklyn Haynes plated the run with a hard groundout after Maddox had moved the runner over to third with a liner off the pitcher's glove.

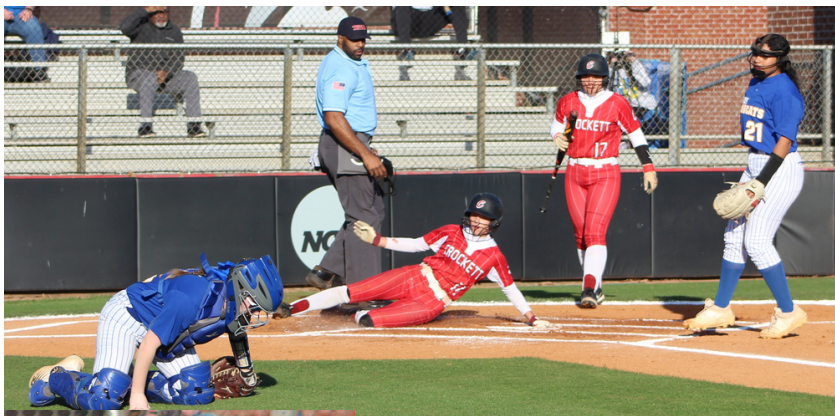
Haynes took the defensive spotlight in the bottom of seventh with a diving catch of a liner to right-center by McNairy third baseman Kenlee Crouse, and Crockett had its season-opening win.

"Once we got a few innings in, the bats started coming around," Barker said. "We barreled up a lot of balls that were caught, so all in all it was a good start. McNairy is a good program, having won a state championship last year. Obviously this is a different team, but their program is solid and it's a nice way to get the season going."

Crockett outhit McNairy 8-5 in the victory, with White going 2-for-4 to spark the offense.

Barker's club returns to the Union field Tuesday (tonight) to face Scotts Hill at 5:00 p.m.

Below: Piper White slides in with the season's first run when the ball eludes the McNairy catcher as Lady Cav hitter Lynden Cole (17) looks on.



Above: McNairy answered right back when leadoff hitter Bailee Shelton - here being greeted by teammates at home plate - slammed a homer over the right-center field fence.



Left: Crockett second baseman Kinleigh Lamb watches her third-inning base hit sail through the right side, breaking a 1-1 tie and giving the Lady Cavs a lead they'd never surrender.

Right: Senior first baseman Jayden Maddox made a great backhand stab of a hard grounder, and Kinleigh Lamb (right) had the presence of mind - and the speed - to get over to cover first...

Below: ... for the out that snuffed a potential fourth-inning McNairy rally.



Above: Courtesy runner Gabby Bursey miraculously keep her toe on the bag during this steal attempt to help set up Crockett's next scoring opportunity.

Below: Crockett junior Piper White stays back in the box and drives a two-run single to right to push the Lady Cavs' lead to 4-1 in the fifth.



Left: Lady Cav right fielder Sadie Hoover (right) races in for a short flare to right field that just eluded a backtracking Kinleigh Lamb. Hoover's hustle held the batter to one base, helping snuff another potential Lady Bobcat threat.



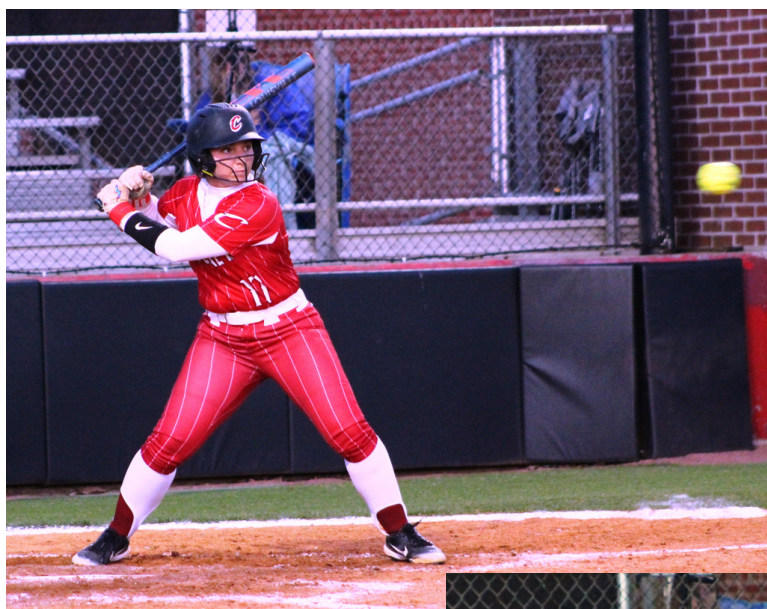
Above: Pitcher Anna Stallings ducks out of the way as third sacker Madison Solis fires a throw to first to retire a McNairy batter.



Above: Head coach David Barker gets ready to direct some base-running action as Crockett would break it open in the fifth inning.



Above: Anna Stallings just kept getting stronger as the game went on, staying ahead of the McNairy hitters and collecting 12 strikeouts.



Left: In her final at-bat of the night, Crockett's Lynden Cole finally saw the pitch she wanted, and...

Below: ... belted it deep to right-center, off the outfield wall for a double, just missing her first opposite-field home run.

Below: When it was all over, Crockett had a season-opening 7-1 win, ready to return to Union Tuesday evening to face Scotts Hill.

