

"SMALL BALL," BIG EXECUTION BOOSTS SOFTBALLERS PAST SOUTH GIBSON 7-5



Above: Lynden Cole delivered the big hit in the sixth inning for the Lady Cavs as they knocked off district foe South Gibson 7-5.

By Ron Barry

Even though his softball team had gotten off to a 6-2 start this season, Coach David Barker has been lamenting the fact that his Crockett County Lady Cavaliers weren't executing well in some of the necessities of the game, such as playing "small ball" when necessary. "Small ball" is a general term used to describe the things a team needs to do properly when it just needs to score one run: drop a good bunt, move a runner over, steal a key base, etc.

Well – in one inning Tuesday night in the squad's home opener against district foe South Gibson – Crockett's "big" execution of the "small ball" concept laid the preparation to put the outcome in the hands of the senior who relishes those moments: catcher Lynden Cole.

Crockett had jumped to a surprising 4-0 lead after three innings; surprising because – as Cole noted after the game – "they DID kick our butts last year."

Enter the fourth frame. Barker had just said this past weekend "almost every high school team has a bad defensive inning every game" – and here it came for the Lady Cavs.

A leadoff single, a walk, another single, and a hit batter put South Gibson on the scoreboard. A ground ball went for an error and cut the advantage to 4-3. Another error allowed the Lady Hornets to tie it 4-4. Yet another infield miscue loaded the bases. An infield single scored the go-ahead run before pitcher Anna Stallings got the final two outs on a strikeout and a liner to left fielder Brooklyn Haynes.

When the Lady Cavs went down in order in the bottom of the fourth, it looked like the tide had turned in South Gibson's favor.

But Stallings got through the fifth and sixth without damage – and then the magic began to happen, with Barker making strategic move after strategic move, and his players executing brilliantly.

Haynes led off with a line-drive single to left. Madison Solis grounded into a fielder's choice, with Haynes being forced at second for the first out. Barker then put freshman speedster Piper Smith in to run for Solis, and sent freshman Gabby Bursey up to pinch-hit for Stallings.

Bursey laid down a perfect bunt toward third base that not only moved Smith to second, but that she beat out for a hit. Barker then rolled the dice again, sending up Sadie Hoover – who usually is the defensive player who doesn't bat when Crockett uses the designated hitter – to pinch-hit for Karly Pigue, who had hit a pinch-hit, three-run homer in the Lady Cavs' game Monday.

On the first pitch, Hoover dropped a perfect sacrifice bunt to advance Crockett's baserunners to second and third. That would bring up Piper White, one of the Lady Cavs' most dependable hitters. But South Gibson intentionally walked her, loading the bases with two outs.

Barker spun the wheel again, sending Destiny Foster to hit for Hannah Carter. Carter's strength is slapping the ball to the left side and beating it out, which is less likely with a forceout available at any base.

"I have been rooting for Destiny all season," Cole said after the game. "As a senior who has not been able to see as much time on the field, she has worked her butt off at practice to show she belongs. Destiny does a great job at having quality at-bats" – which is what she promptly displayed here.

Forcing Lady Hornet pitcher Hailey Stines to be precise, Foster took a ball and a strike – and then, Stines uncorked a wild pitch, allowing Smith to score and tie the game at 5-all, with Crockett's other runners moving to second and third as well. Foster continued the battle by working the count to 2-and-2, fouling off a pitch, and then taking balls three and four for a walk to reload the bases. The speedy Carter then came back in to run for her.

"From an outsider's point of view, a walk may not seem like that big of a deal," Cole said, "but she made the pitcher throw, saw a lot of pitches, and without her doing that the tying run wouldn't have scored. She set the tone in a two-out situation that put pressure on South Gibson. When it was my turn to bat, a little pressure was taken off because of Destiny. We were now in a tied situation with bases loaded rather than being down by one with two outs."

As you've surmised by now, it was Cole's turn to hit.

"This season I have been struggling at the plate," she said, "so I just told myself all I needed was contact, considering I had struck out my previous at-bat. I knew the pitcher had been jamming me inside all game, so I took a step off the plate and just hoped to barrel something up."

While Cole described what followed as "it didn't end up working out that way," she got enough of a 1-0 pitch to send it into center field, bringing home Bursey and White with the go-ahead runs to produce the eventual 7-5 winning score.

"I love pressure moments now, and it hasn't always been that way," Cole said. "Hitting used to be my weak point up until my junior year. I was excited when I saw a younger girl like Gabby get put in on the spot and do a job, and that brought the overall energy up. Keeping our energy consistent in the dugout, especially after our bad defensive inning, kept us in the game."

After allowing a leadoff single in the seventh to South Gibson's Annie Whittemore, Stallings induced a fielder's choice from Hallie Allen and then struck out the next two Lady Hornets to record the victory. She scattered nine hits and yielded just one earned run, while striking out seven.

"South Gibson is an incredible team when it comes to offense," Cole said. "I talked to Anna consistently throughout the game about pushing the umpire's strike zone and keeping the ball low or extremely up. If we could get those pitches called off the plate it would throw their hitters off, causing them to start chasing, which is what happened. I may have knocked in the leading runs but many aspects of the team's execution during intense moments are what allowed us to come out with the win."

White scored three of Crockett's seven runs in the game after collecting a walk and two hits, including a triple. Haynes and Kinleigh Lamb also had two hits for the Lady Cavs, and Cole drove home three runs.

Crockett is now 7-2 and will host Arlington Wednesday evening (today) at 5:00.



Left: Crockett received a huge at-bat from pinch-hitter Destiny Foster, who took a wild pitch that tied the game and then worked a walk to load the bases for Lynden Cole.



Above: The Lady Cavs also received a perfectly executed pinch-hit bunt for a hit from Gabby Bursey (seen here with Coach David Barker)...



Left: ... and a perfectly executed pinch-hit sacrifice bunt from Sadie Hoover to help set the stage for Destiny Foster and Lynden Cole.