

BARKER HOPES LIFE LESSONS LONG OUTLIVE SOFTBALL KNOWLEDGE



Above: All season long, the Lady Cavs paid tribute to late teammate Reese Barker with ribbons bearing a dinosaur and the #LLR hashtag (#LiveLikeReese), as seen here on senior infielder Karly Pigue. (Photo by Ron Barry)

By Ron Barry

“I’m just extremely grateful that these parents entrusted their young ladies to me for these last couple of years. I hope the life lessons we’ve tried to teach them will long outlive any successes or mistakes they ever had on the softball field.”

With those words, Crockett County softball coach David Barker exited the Dyer County softball field with his head held high despite watching his team lose an 11-5 decision to the Lady Choctaws in the District 13-AAA Tournament, ending the Lady Cavaliers’ season.

By the time the game ended, Barker had plenty of time to get over the five errors his club had made in the third inning alone to allow the seven-run rally that blew the game open for the hosts. Instead of fuming about it – especially with a large group of seniors under his wing – he gathered them in the outfield and encouraged them to live lives that will bring respect to their names and loving service to their neighbors.

“It isn’t easy to be a coach,” he said after his talk, “but this group of girls makes it about as easy as it could be. And that includes their parents. It’s just a wonderful group of people. Nobody should ever be wary about coaching softball at Crockett County.”

While there were plenty of tears flowing at the game’s conclusion – after all, it was the final game of their careers for a significant portion of the Lady Cav roster – it was obvious that the players had taken Barker’s words to heart. They knew the man spoke from experience.

It’s still been less than a year since Barker’s daughter Reese – a teammate in the 2023 season when Crockett earned a berth in the TSSAA State Tournament – was killed in an automobile accident. Many of the players wore ribbons in their hair all season that featured a dinosaur – one of Reese’s passions – and the #LLR hashtag, a reminder to Live Like Reese. As they came up short of their goals in this tournament, it wasn’t hard to be reminded that there are more important things in life than wins on a softball field.

So when it was over, no player summarized the season better than senior catcher Lynden Cole, who’ll be bound for Pensacola State College in the fall with the dream to eventually earn an offer from a Southeastern Conference school – and she’ll have plenty of lessons learned in Crockett County to carry with her.

“Our season did not finish as I had hoped,” she said, “but I sure am grateful for the lessons learned and the wisdom I have gained. While losing is not something I necessarily enjoy, especially when it ended our season, I have learned that losing comes with a sense of gratitude – a new respect and thankfulness for the game of softball is formed. Understanding that it is a game of failure... Learning to win is hard, learning to lead is hard, but learning to lose is the most difficult task.

“Remembering that the reason I love this game is because it is hard. Learning that success is more rewarding when it follows failure. I have failed this season as much as I have succeeded, but what made it special was conquering the hard with a family I love dearly. We did not reach our goal, but there is not a group that I would rather fail, succeed, mourn, and celebrate with other than these girls and coaches. We have grieved, laughed, cried, celebrated, and lost together, and I would not have it any other way.

“Our coaches individually, and collectively, went through unimaginable circumstances and instead of turning their backs and feeding into the side of life that does not seem to give any mercy, they stepped up and were there for us when they could’ve easily been there for themselves. I will never be able to repay Coach Barker, Coach (Jeremy) Maddox, Coach (Spencer) Bursey, and Coach (Will) Rigby for the sacrifices and effort they made for us. They have taught me more than anyone can imagine and I am thankful for the wisdom they have each passed down to my teammates and me.”

Another senior, infielder Karly Pigue, expressed her appreciation for what this team had done for her.

“I’m so grateful God gave me an opportunity to play with these girls,” she said. “We managed to make it to the state tournament last year, making school history. Softball has given me life-long memories and life-long friendships. Thank you to my teammates. Thank you for picking me up when I’m down, thank you for cheering me on. Thank you for being my friends.”

As for the game itself, Crockett jumped to a 3-0 lead in the top of the first on a run-scoring single by Kinleigh Lamb and a couple of Dyer County errors. But the Lady Cavs made a couple of mental mistakes on plays in the bottom of the frame, and the Lady Choctaws were right back in it at 3-3.

Piper White singled in Gabby Bursey in the top of the second to push Crockett back in front 4-3, and the Lady Cavs pushed it to 5-3 in the top of the third when Jayden Maddox singled with two outs and pinch-runner Chloe Adkisson came all the way around to score when Bursey's double down the left-field line was bobbled for an error.

But then came the disastrous bottom of the third. Dyer County had loaded the bases with one out when a ground ball produced a force at second and a wide relay to first that never should have been thrown. That opened the floodgates, and the Lady Choctaws proceeded to take advantage of four more Crockett fielding miscues to forge a 10-5 advantage.

The Lady Cav offense never got back on track after that. The brightest spot for Crockett the rest of the game was relief pitcher Gracelyn Miller - as a senior, playing in her last game - who threw 2.1 innings of scoreless ball and even singled in her only plate appearance.

While starting hurler Anna Stallings wasn't as sharp as she had been in some previous outings, eight of the 11 runs she was charged with were unearned. She was doing enough to keep Crockett competitive in the game if the defensive plays had simply been made behind her. Dyer County totaled only six hits in the game.

Crockett had nine, with two apiece by White, Bursey, and Sadie Hoover. The Lady Choctaws intentionally walked Cole in her first two at-bats, effectively taking her potent bat out of the offense.

The Lady Cavs finished the season with a 19-13-1 record. A future story will contain the final 2024 season statistics.

Remaining CCHS sports action now is reduced to the soccer team's quest to win the district tournament it is hosting and the appearance of several Cavalier athletes in the TSSAA State Track & Field Championships to be held soon in Murfreesboro.

Crockett's soccer hosts Obion County at Cavalier Stadium tonight (Tuesday) at 7:00 after a 5:30 semifinal between Dyersburg and South Gibson. The championship game is Thursday evening.

Right: There weren't many defensive bright spots for Crockett against Dyer County, but second baseman Kinleigh Lamb made two of them early. On the first one -- from the prone position pictured here -- she accurately tossed the ball to shortstop Piper White to get a forceout after catching a ground ball with a full-extension dive. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Left: Sadie Hoover smacked this line-drive single and was one of three Lady Cavs who collected two hits in the contest. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Below: On the second play, Kinleigh Lamb had to quickly charge a softly hit bouncing ball to the right side, which she underhanded to first sacker Jayden Maddox to record the out. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Below: In four at-bats, senior Destiny Foster had a successful sacrifice bunt, advanced a runner from second to third with a groundout, drew a walk, and then drilled this hard line drive to center, but it was caught. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Above: Gabby Bursey ripped a double down the third-base line after a single by Jayden Maddox ... (Photo by Ron Barry)



Left: Senior Jayden Maddox had singled, and stands next to first base coach Jeremy Maddox -- her dad -- for the final time in her high school career. (Photo by Ron Barry)





Above: Senior catcher Lynden Cole -- seen here ripping a liner to center with her final high school swing -- had words of wisdom to summarize some of the lessons learned from the season. (Photo by Ron Barry)

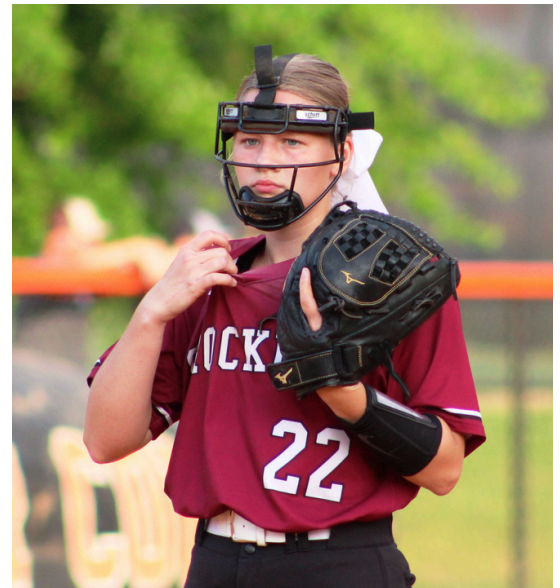


Left: Gracelyn Miller also smacked this hard single to right field in her final time at bat as a Lady Cavalier. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Below: The brightest spot for the Lady Cavaliers in the later innings was relief pitcher Gracelyn Miller, who threw 2.1 frames of scoreless ball. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Above: Gabby Bursey ripped a double down the third-base line after a single by Jayden Maddox and the ball was misplayed in the outfield as pinch-runner Chloe Adkisson (pictured above) came racing around third to score a Crockett run. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Left: Coach David Barker tried to settle his infield down on a couple of occasions early in the game, when errors and mental mistakes were compounding. (Photo by Ron Barry)