

UNIQUE SEASON-OPENER MAKES LADY CAVS WINNERS IN MORE THAN ONE WAY



Above: Stephanie Joyner closed out Crockett's scoring with a goal well into the second half as the Lady Cavs debuted with a 4-0 win over South Side. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Above: Nataly Amador (left), with teammate Aime Aguillar running alongside her, makes a dash for the McKenzie goal in the CCMS 5-0 triumph over the Lady Rebels Monday. (Photo by Ron Barry)

By Ron Barry

There's a new ad for Nike that debuted during the Olympic Games in which the narrator (a very anguished Willem Dafoe) continually asks, "Does that make me a bad person?" while a variety of superstar and little-known athletes provide visual examples of disdain, disrespect, and a general lack of concern for their opponents. It ends with the dubious tagline, "Winning isn't for everyone."

Crockett County Lady Cavalier soccer coach Carli Branson would much prefer what was displayed on her own team's field Tuesday night in Alamo.

For the 2024 season opener - which also featured the return of Branson to the head coaching ranks in Crockett World - the Lady Cavs hosted Jackson South Side. They invited all spectators to wear black - as a token of support for a key member of the OPPOSING team. And they even took up donations for that Lady Hawk player as fans entered the stadium.

Does that make THEM bad persons? Hardly.

Just prior to the start of the new school year, South Side's Brynlee Merriweather was involved in a serious automobile accident that claimed the lives of her sister Aaliyah and her sister's boyfriend. Brynlee survived but remains in stable but serious condition, and faces a long road to recovery. Her family will face serious medical expenses, and Tuesday's donations are intended to alleviate the burden somewhat.

It's a gesture you wouldn't see from many schools toward an opposing player. But Crockett County High School lost one of its own athletes just a year ago - softball player and football manager Reese Barker - and the school's students and athletes know what the feeling is like. And they've been trying to [#LiveLikeReese](#) ever since.

And you know what? Reese would have organized some kind of fundraiser for Brynlee Merriweather. That's who she was.

So that's what the Lady Cavaliers did Tuesday night. They raised money for an opponent, and then showed that opponent the ultimate level of respect by playing at a high level in a 4-0 Crockett victory. So - in a sense - they won twice in the same night.

The other sub-stories were there for the asking, and there was no shortage of them: Branson's return as Lady Cav head coach, after a year of tending to three small children in a decision her family needed her to make at the time; new players from other Crockett sports who were taking on soccer for the very first time - including one with a last name synonymous with local soccer success; position changes for a couple of returnees; and a goalkeeper who was watching her very first official game... from directly in front of the net, trying to keep the Lady Hawks from scoring.

And she did, aided by a strong defensive back line that limited South Side to just four relatively harmless shots on goal - all of which Crockett basketball center Amaria Walker stopped, earning a "clean sheet" (a soccer shutout) in her very first try.

The game also marked the first official appearance for assistant coach Joseph Soriano, who will take on head duties when the boys team begins its season next spring. In the meantime, he's helping Branson and fellow assistant Jennie Agee, and he's been especially active teaching a very young team the ins and outs of soccer strategy, lineups, and formations.

And he was as happy as anyone at the game's conclusion. Why? "Because these girls showed us they have been hearing all the things we've been saying," Soriano smiled.

So back to the sub-stories. It is clear as day that Branson belongs on a soccer field somewhere, so it might as well be THIS one. Her enthusiasm for the sport, and her desire for her players to learn the game but still have fun while playing it, is infectious. She knows this squad is young and very short on experience, but she was excited with what she saw Tuesday night.

"Good soccer depends a lot on smart spacing and positioning," Branson said, "and our girls held their positions very well, especially on the defensive back line. We have some pretty good height with our defenders (specifically Dani Rios and Chayse Lewis), and when they stay in front of the ball, it isn't easy to get off many quality shots."

Another sub-story involves multi-sport athletes trying soccer for the first time, like Walker. Basketball player Lanyah Cathey is another, and her athleticism will pay off as she gets more familiar with the sport. She almost punched in a goal during a scrum in front of the net on a pinballing corner kick, but a South Side defender deflected it at the last second after Cathey had pushed it past the sliding goaltender.

But the new player with the most "pressure" is probably softball player Hannah Carter. Her older sister Mary – now at UT-Martin – was the team's leading scorer two years ago. Her younger brother Luke is one of the best players in West Tennessee for the current Cavalier boys. So – naturally – Hannah scored a goal in the very first official game in which she played. "It was fun," she laughed. "I wish I'd started playing sooner."

Highlighting the final sub-story was the play of Lydia Waddey, a Tasmanian Devil-like bundle of energy who has been a defensive back wing in the past but is now a center midfielder. It's basically her job to "engineer" the game, always aware of where everyone else is and what needs to be done to get Crockett on the attack.

"Lydia always is conscious of her surroundings," Branson said. "She knows who's around her; she knows how to get the ball to the right people for an offensive attack, and she knows how to clog things up to prevent the other team from attacking. And she never gets tired! She's just a dynamo out there!"

Lydia's younger sister Rebecca was just as active keeping the ball distributed on the offensive end.

When all was said and done Tuesday night, the Lady Cavaliers scored twice in each half on their way to the 4-0 triumph. Emme Grace Martin notched the first goal of the season with a high looping kick which she steered directly over the goalie's head from short range. Avery Thornton made it 2-0 with a charge from the right side, somehow pushing a shot through from what seemed like a near-impossible angle.

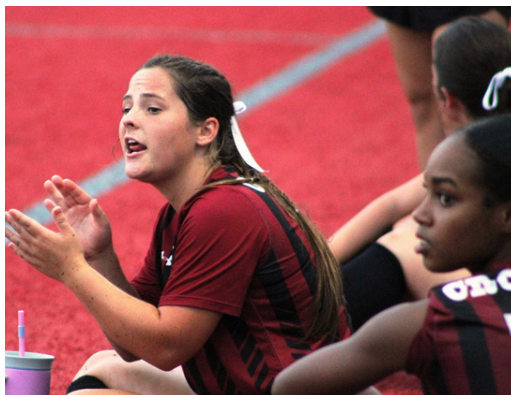
Carter notched her first career goal fairly early in the second half, and Stephanie Joyner finished off the Lady Hawks with a rebound boot with about 12 minutes left to play. Joyner also had an assist in the contest, while Rios contributed two and Braniyah Green another.

"Our girls got a late start this summer, but they've been working hard to learn new things and they showed it against South Side," Branson said. "This is a good one to build on."

At the game's conclusion, both the Lady Cavaliers and the Lady Hawks joined in an intermingled circle on the field to offer up a prayer for Brynlee Merriweather and her family.

Sorry, Nike – with all due respect (which you disdain), you don't have to be a jerk to be a winner.

Crockett returns to the field Thursday night at 6:00 for a Senior Night duel with Ripley.



Above: Hannah Carter cheers on her teammates late in the game from the bench area after scoring a goal in her very first official soccer game. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Right: Emme Grace Martin (3), taking a pass here from Rebecca Waddey, tallied the first goal of the season for the victorious Lady Cavs. (Photo by Ron Barry)

OTHER SPORT NUGGETS: Crockett sophomore Jack Shaver shot a 77 – six strokes better than a year before – to pace the Cavalier golfers in the 18-hole Fellowship of Christian Athletes Tournament at the Jackson County Club Monday; Franklin Road Academy won the team title...

Kalynn Lewis, Olivia Barger, and Caroline Scruggs tallied goals as the CCMS girls soccer team posted a big 5-0 win over McKenzie Monday; "Our defense was again solid," said Coach Doug Wede, "working as a unit to preserve our side of the field from limited pressure"...

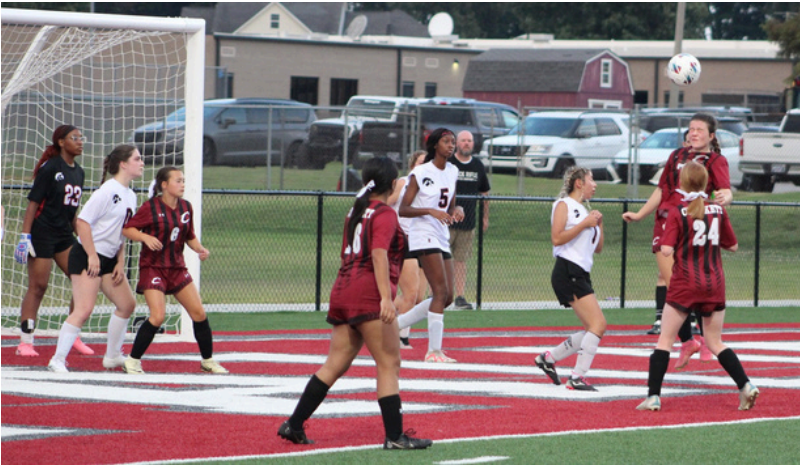
Quarterback Will Dodds ran for two touchdowns, passed for two more, and also returned an interception for another score as the CCMS gridgers demolished Milan 42-8 Monday night in Alamo...

Emilee Chandler had a single and triple, drove in two runs, and allowed just one earned run over six innings as the winning pitcher as CCMS toppled Milan Middle School 9-4 Tuesday night; Lily Cole added a double and Jentry Maddox, Khylee Cobb, and Naudia Turner drove in additional runs for Coach Duke Kail's softballers, who are now 3-2 on the season.



Above: Showing a very unusual talent, Crockett's Lydia Waddey uses her braided hair to push off a South Side defender and open up some operating space in Tuesday's Lady Cavalier win. (Photo by Ron Barry)





Above: Rebecca Waddey (far right) tries to head in a Crockett corner kick from a crowded goal area, but the attempt was thwarted by the number of defenders in the box. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Above: Lady Cav defender Adalee Doyle clears a ball away from a Lady Hawk attacker. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Above: Lanyah Cathey (15) tries to push a shot past the fallen South Side goalie as Braniyah Green (9) streaks in from the left side, but the ball was deflected just wide of the goal. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Above: Crockett opened the season with a "clean sheet" (a shutout) for rookie goalie Amaria Walker (in yellow), but she was aided considerably by defensive help from players such as Chayse Lewis (5) and Dani Rios (15). (Photo by Ron Barry)



Left: Avery Thornton goes all out to make an acrobatic reception of this lead pass and then somehow found a way to punch a shot through the South Side defense for Crockett's second goal. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Above: CCMS running back Chris Vance (4) searches for an opening on a sweep of left end in Monday's 42-8 rout of Milan to open the middle school football season. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Above: CCMS receiver Davis Porter beat his Milan defender deep and hauled in this long pass from quarterback Will Dodds for a touchdown and the go-ahead score that propelled the Cavs' 42-8 win Monday. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Left: Crockett sophomore Jack Shaver lines up a putt on his way to a team-leading 77 in the FCA Tournament at the Jackson Country Club Monday. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Below: The fitting climax to Tuesday's CCHS soccer game with Jackson South Side was an inter-team prayer for injured Lady Hawk star Brynlee Merriweather. This is sport at its best in West Tennessee. (Photo by Ron Barry)

