

STRANGE-SOUNDING WORDS: CROCKETT ELIMINATES DYERSBURG IN GIRLS SOCCER



Above: A final team shot, with some Branson kids thrown in for good measure. Crockett is now 10-3-1 for the season. (Photo by Ron Barry)

By Ron Barry

The score is 2-2. The air is getting crisper by the minute, as a 77-degree day is on its way to becoming a 54-degree night.

Rebecca Waddey stands a few steps behind and to the left of the soccer ball, resting 12 yards from the Dyersburg goal line – the spot designated for a penalty kick, a one-on-one battle of wits with the opposing goaltender.

And Waddey's mind is racing like an Olympic sprinter with her pants on fire

Only 5 minutes and 35 seconds remain in regulation time of this District Tournament semifinal at South Gibson County High School in Medina. The winner will advance to the championship game of the tournament, but more importantly will lock up a berth in next week's Region Tournament. The losing players will pack up their gear, trudge dejectedly back to their bus, and have to find something new to occupy their time for the next several months.

Waddey is a sophomore at Crockett County High. She's playing on a bum ankle, injured last week in a win over Jackson North Side. If this wasn't a tournament game, she wouldn't be playing on it now. But here she is. Her mind is racing because this is – unbelievably – the third time in this match she's been in this spot.

The first time was way back at the midway point of the first half – 20:20 to go before intermission, to be exact – and Waddey calmly and confidently knocked the ball into the upper left corner of the net, expanding Crockett's lead at the time to 2-0. Waddey had already hammered in the game's first score on an unlikely boot from well outside the goal box, when she literally launched herself into the ball with a ferocity rarely seen from that distance. The sphere sailed past a couple of defenders and floated just above the outstretched arms of an absolutely stunned Dyersburg keeper, who wasn't expecting such a sudden shot.

It must be noted that until two weeks ago, the Lady Cavaliers had not beaten Dyersburg in six years. In fact, in a district tournament matchup four years ago – when Crockett was enjoying a decent season and was beginning to show distinct progress toward building a successful program – the Lady Trojans embarrassed the Lady Cavs with a beating so lopsided it may have blown a fuse on the Medina City Park scoreboard, where the teams were playing that year.

The games have grown more competitive since then, and two weeks ago Coach Carli Branson's crew finally broke through with a victory, earned after two overtimes and a penalty kick shootout. Immediately after that result, though, Branson knew Dyersburg was going to be itching for a rematch to prove it was a fluke.

But after building its 2-0 advantage on the strength of Waddey's foot, Crockett was more than holding its own in the rematch – until it wasn't.

A Dyersburg goal at the 17:53 mark made it 2-1. Another one with 13:39 left in the half deadlocked things at 2-2. The entire momentum had shifted, and everyone in the SGC facility knew it. Somehow, however, the Lady Cavs managed to keep it tied for the remainder of the period.

Now, 5:35 is all that's remaining, and Waddey's mind is racing. It's racing because the second time Waddey stood in this position in this match – with 34:09 on the clock – she'd missed the net from this same distance. Teammate Emme Grace Martin had been knocked down from behind on a rare Crockett rush toward the goal, and a foul had been called. A penalty kick was awarded, and Branson selected Waddey to take it again.

Perhaps figuring the keeper would lean toward the upper left corner again, Waddey tried to slide a low shot just inside the right goalpost. It slid just outside the right goalpost. The game was still 2-2, and Dyersburg's avalanche of momentum was gaining acceleration.

In high school soccer, the halves are 40 minutes long. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the Lady Trojans controlled possession of the ball for 33 of the first 34 minutes of the final half. Again – somehow – the Lady Cavs miraculously kept the ball out of their net.

Sometimes it took a marvelous save by senior goalkeeper Amaria Walker, who – despite being in her very first year of soccer – long ago shed the label of “rookie” with the excellence of her play. Walker stopped at least four point-blank shots in this match and dove on top of a couple of other opportunities before the Lady Trojans could launch an attempt. Sometimes it was the strategic spatial play of the Crockett back line, which Branson credited to assistant coach Joey Soriano.

“He has taught us the importance of using your spacing to overcome a lack of speed,” Brandon said, adding with a laugh, “and we’re not the fastest defensive team around here.” But Hannah Carter – who is fast – teamed with Dani Rios, Chayse Lewis, Claire Nichols, Kendra Suarez, and Adalee Doyle to keep the Dyersburg frontal attack confounded enough that the score was still 2-2.

Suddenly Crockett cleared a long ball, and Martin chased it down and was steering it into the box and toward the Dyersburg goal when she was shoved from behind with enough illegal fervor to draw a whistle from the official. Another penalty kick.

So here we are. There's 5:35 left. And Rebecca Waddey's mind is racing. Branson had shown no hesitation to select Waddey for the kick again, despite the miss almost 30 minutes earlier.

“I knew that the last thing Rebecca Waddey was going to do in this situation was not get it between the goalposts,” Branson said later. “She's tough as nails, and I knew she should be back out there.” So... there's 5:35 left. Rebecca Waddey stands behind the ball again – and her mind is racing.

“I beat myself up pretty badly for missing the last one,” she admitted. “But you have to believe in yourself to be successful. And I just told myself to believe.”

Rebecca Waddey stands behind the ball. There is a look of determination on her face. But there's something else there too. She looks... peaceful.

She steps toward the ball and delicately – not too hard, not too soft – punches it past the Dyersburg keeper into the net. She watches it hit the netting with the hint of a sly smile on her face, turns around, and completely rids herself of that “peaceful” look she had seconds before. Rebecca Waddey lets out a primal scream as her teammates rush to congratulate her, confident now that the first victory over the Lady Trojans two weeks ago was not, in fact, a fluke.

Dyersburg plays furiously over the remaining time, but Crockett defenders – including some of the midfielders and front-liners, who are now in protect mode – keep clearing balls away from the Lady Cav box. Lydia Waddey, Rebecca's senior sister and a key reason for the Crockett resurgence this year, kicks one clearout so well it literally defines the term: she boots it clear out of the facility. When the final seconds are finally killed, Crockett wins 3-2 and will face South Gibson Thursday night at 6:00 for the District Tournament championship. The win also puts the Lady Cavs into next week's Region Tournament, which begins Tuesday.

“This success was a direct result of all of the little moments this season,” Branson said. “The shared joy when teammates are successful; the shared accountability when things do not go our way; the resilience to never settle; the belief that they are good enough and deserve to be here.

“These girls had homework last week: watch the Dyersburg film and come up with 10 things to fix as a team and individual, and that was film from a game we won. Each and every player submitted their answers to me and to see their answers was another reminder of how coachable this team is.

“Our saying this year has been, ‘The moment before THE MOMENT.’ You don't become great overnight. The success of this team comes from all of the small moments they have put in so they can reach THE MOMENT they are striving for. Countless hours of practice, reflection, accountability, grit, and grind have been crammed in to a very short amount of time. These girls started the third week of July and doubled their work ethic to make up for lost time in May and June. There are so many more moments ahead of them now and we look to get better and push through.”

VOLLEYBALL: Crockett's soccer team was not the only group of Lady Cavaliers to send a Dyersburg team home for the winter Tuesday night.

Playing at Dyer County High in Newbern in the District Tournament, Coach Andrew Laman's Lady Cav volleyballers split the first two sets of their semifinal match with the Lady Trojans before then sweeping the final two to earn a 3-1 triumph. The win earns a Regional Tournament berth next week and puts Crockett into Thursday night's title game against the host Lady Choctaws.

Dyersburg and Crockett have a recent history of tight battles, and this was no different as the Lady Trojans bounced back from the opening set loss to win Set 2 26-24. But Crockett took the next two to eliminate Dyersburg from further contention and set up its third duel with Dyer County this season.

Full coverage and photos of the championship game will be on this website Friday.



Right: Kendra Juarez was another tough defender for Crockett, clearing several balls out of a crowded box for the winners. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Above: The play that decided it all: Crockett's Emme Grace Martin, while sprinting toward the Dyersburg goal, is shoved with an elbow from behind by a Lady Trojan defender ... (Photo by Ron Barry)

Below: ... and the follow-through on the arm of the shover proves that it was not inadvertent contact. Martin's hustle drew three penalty kicks for the Lady Cavs, producing two goals. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Below: But before all of that, the defensive play of Crockett's Hannah Carter was a key factor. Every time Dyersburg tried an attack from the left side, Carter was there to foil it by any (legal) means necessary. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Above: Lady Cav sophomore Rebecca Waddey (7) got the scoring started with this incredible shot in which she launched herself at the ball, drove it over three defenders, and sailed it just above the keeper and below the crossbar. If the NBA's Danny Breen had been calling it, we would have heard: "From WAY downtown... BANG!" (Photo by Ron Barry)



Right: With 20:20 left in the opening half, Rebecca Waddey made it 2-0 by sticking this penalty kick into the top left corner after Emme Grace Martin had been tripped from behind. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Left: An early scoring opportunity for Dyersburg on a corner kick was thwarted when Crockett's Claire Nichols (25) got a knee on the ball, giving goalkeeper Amaria Walker time to dive after it and deflect it ... (Photo by Ron Barry)

Below: ... over to Dani Rios (15), who was able to clear it away as Hannah Carter guards the net behind her. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Below: Crockett sophomore Braniya Green (14) prepares to defend a Dyersburg throw-in from the sideline. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Above: Senior Lydia Waddey, ever the battler, counters an elbow to the face with an elbow of her own as she fights for possession against a Lady Trojan attacker. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Left: Nyah Cathey (4) slips past a Dyersburg triple-team in an effort to get off a first-half shot attempt. (Photo by Ron Barry)





Above: Coach Carli Branson's halftime talk was an assurance to the Lady Cavs that they deserved to be in this position because of the effort and the little things they had performed. Her words helped them persevere to the victory. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Below: Assistant coach Joey Soriano gives encouragement to Nyah Cathey, who was catching a breather on the sidelines. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Below: Claire Nichols (25) -- just a freshman -- provided staunch defensive support for the Lady Cavs throughout the game. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Above: Hannah Carter communicates an assignment with a teammate as Dyersburg prepares a throw-in. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Left: Emme Grace Martin played extended minutes in a new position, partially as a fill-in for the unavailable Avery Thornton. Martin's speed enabled her to draw the fouls that resulted in two of Rebecca Wadley's three goals. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Above: On the final penalty kick, with 5:35 remaining and the score tied at 2-2, Rebecca Waddey let fly with this boot at the Dyersburg net ... (Photo by Ron Barry)

Below: ... and gazes anxiously as it zips past the Lady Trojan keeper and the beginnings of a sly smile appear on her face ... (Photo by Ron Barry)



Below: ... and capping it off with a leap toward the heavens. Waddey has the hat trick, and Crockett has a date in the tournament championship game Thursday night. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Above: ... before spinning around and emitting a primal scream of accomplishment after putting Crockett within reach of a Regional Tournament berth next week ... (Photo by Ron Barry)



Above: Dyersburg's dejection is on display in the right foreground as Rebecca Waddey is mobbed by teammates Lydia Waddey, Braniya Green, Emme Grace Martin, and Stephanie Joyner. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Above: When the final horn sounded, Crockett's sideline rushed the field to join in the celebration. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Below: It was a joyous celebration -- Crockett had not beaten Dyersburg in six years, but has now done so twice in the last two weeks. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Below: It was a special time for these four "Cs": Carley (Lampley), Chayse (Lewis), Cristal (Martinez), and Chloe (Campbell). (Photo by Ron Barry)



Above: No one personifies this team's "grit" and "grind" mentality more than its captains, Lydia Waddey (12) ... (Photo by Ron Barry)



Left: ... and Dani Rios (15), a defensive stalwart, goal and corner kicker, and top communicator. (Photo by Ron Barry)