

CROCKETT VOLLEYBALLERS HANG TOUGH WITH POWERFUL VALOR PREP AT STATE TOURNAMENT



Above: Sadie Hoover's serve and setting abilities will be important Wednesday when Crockett tries to stay alive in the tournament, facing Soddy-Daisy at 2:30 in the losers' bracket. (Photo by Ron Barry)

By Ron Barry

The final score will show a 3-0 sweep by mighty Valor Prep over Crockett County in the opening round of the TSSAA Class AA State Volleyball Tournament in Murfreesboro Tuesday.

What that sweep doesn't tell was the quality of the fight put up by Coach Andrew Laman's Lady Cavaliers, who actually held the lead at various points in all three sets before the top-seeded Lady Wildcats went on runs to overcome the deficits.

Valor Prep, a charter school based in Nashville, is now 27-4 on the season, but had their hands full with Laman's gritty crew. Although outsized on the front line and facing incoming bullets on both serves and kill shots on nearly every possession, Crockett was far from embarrassed in its defeat.

The Lady Cavs led the opening set 8-7 before the Lady Wildcats – whose top players are sophomores and freshmen – went on an 18-6 run to close out their 25-14 triumph.

That could have easily intimidated Crockett's squad, but the Lady Cavs came roaring out of the gate in Set #2 and held advantages of 12-7 and 13-10 before Valor Prep strung together nine straight points off the service of sensational freshman Jentelle McNairl. That run powered the eventual 25-17 score.

Still undaunted – and realizing his club had no reason to hold anything back – Laman encouraged his team to “keep swinging away” when they had kill opportunities. That approach produced an 11-9 lead on a tremendous block by Crockett freshman Wesley Thornton.

Valor moved ahead 14-12 with another small run, but the Lady Cavs battled to tie it 14-14 and 15-15 and were within a point at 20-19 before the Lady Wildcats hit the gas and tallied the final five points for a 25-19 margin.

Valor Prep featured an enthusiastic cheering section, with several of its male athletes dressed as chefs. In addition to McNairl, the Lady Wildcats also benefited greatly from sophomore dynamo Anarela Meijas Ayala, who drills topspin serves at high velocity. Crockett's Achilles heel Tuesday was the service return game, which was somewhat understandable considering what was incoming.

The Lady Cavs now have their backs against the wall in the double-elimination event, but face Soddy-Daisy Wednesday at 2:30 at Siegel High School in Murfreesboro. Soddy-Daisy is 15-21 on the season, the only team to make the tournament this year with a losing record. Crockett is now 25-12 and will play again Thursday morning at 9:30 if it defeats Soddy-Daisy.



Left: Several Crockett students made the trek to Murfreesboro to cheer on the Lady Cavs. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Above: Lady Cav head coach Andrew Laman threw a little bit of everything at the top-seeded Lady Wildcats, but they countered everything Crockett tried just enough to score the victory. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Below: Madi Collins readies herself for a teammate's serve -- and may be checking to see if all her fingers are still there after making a bold block. (Photo by Ron Barry)





Above: A good illustration of what Crockett faced against top-ranked Valor Prep was this kill attempt by Dee Cole, which was blocked straight down onto the Lady Cavaliers' side for a Valor point. The Lady Wildcats had an imposing front line and high-velocity servers. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Below: Another common sight Tuesday was Crockett libero Piper White (6) diving to try to dig one of Valor Prep's effective topspin serves. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Below: Lady Cav senior Brennan Morris -- with her tennis doubles partner Izzy Yearwood in the background cheering her on -- prepares to fire one of her rocket serves at Valor Prep. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Above: Braniya Green (14) tries to head a ball to CrocCrockett had no answer for Valor's spectacular freshman Jentelle McNairl, who served nine straight points to break open a tight second set. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Above: Keeton Holyfield managed a third-set smile when Crockett pulled even at 15-15. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Left: Crockett had its moments -- such as this winning slam from Jordyn Maddox -- and made the top-seeded Lady Wildcats work for all three sets. Piper White (6), Katherine West (3), and Lakyn Forsythe (34) are backing Maddox up on this shot. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Left: Two more obstacles for Crockett to overcome: the powerful serve of sophomore Anarela Meijas Ayala (26) and the enthusiastic student body cheering for her and her Valor Prep teammates. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Left: Katherine West tries to encourage a teammate who's about to launch a serve in the final set. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Below: Wesley Thornton takes a quiet moment to reset her focus after an unusually long rally with Valor Prep. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Above: Dee Cole and Wesley Thornton laugh it up with Crockett teammates Sadie Hoover (1) and Madi Collins (16) after a Thornton block pushed the Lady Cavs ahead 11-9 in Set #3. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Above: So strong was Valor Prep's service game that this scene was all too common: Piper White trying to chase down a ball that had caromed waywardly off a teammate's pass attempt. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Left: Piper Smith cups her hands to holler encouragement to the Lady Cavaliers. (Photo by Ron Barry)