

CROCKETT SOCCER CAPTURES FOURTH STRAIGHT REGION CHAMPIONSHIP IN OVERTIME THRILLER



Above: It's the proverbial "thrill of victory" at the top and the "agony of defeat" at the bottom. Cav teammates mob Chris Cerda and Luke Carter in the pile up top, while South Gibson goalkeeper Kooper McFarland lies in a dejected heap below. (Photo by Ron Barry)

By Ron Barry

Like Steph Curry, sometimes it helps if your team's top scorer is also a pretty proficient passer – and just as importantly, that he's WILLING to pass.

And while the NBA and high school soccer have stark differences, the scorer/passing thing remains relevant.

Because it's true, Crockett County secured its fourth consecutive Region 7-AA Tournament championship Wednesday night in Medina, defeating fierce rival South Gibson 4-2 in an epic overtime classic that will be remembered for quite a while.

Observers will remember the Cavaliers' Luke Carter – named just last week as District 13-AA's Offensive Player of the Year and who "always puts his team first," according to Coach Joey Soriano – turned playmaker once the overtime session began, creating two perfect feeds from opposite corners to produce the goals that sent Crockett into Saturday's West Sectional in Alamo, just one win away from a TSSAA State Tournament berth.

Crockett (now 13-4) will play the loser of Friday's Region 8-AA final between Memphis Kirby and Brighton. The sectional will take place in Cavalier Stadium Saturday afternoon at a time to be determined later.

Before Wednesday night's overtime began, it was becoming apparent that one way to turn the host Hornets into one of Tennessee's top teams is to make it look like they don't have a chance to win. Crockett has now witnessed it twice.

Last week in the district championship, the Cavs built a 3-0 lead midway through the second half, only to have the suddenly resurrected SGC squad net the match's last four goals and win 4-3 with an unbelievably furious comeback that Crockett couldn't thwart.

Wednesday night, the Cavs built a hard-fought 2-0 advantage. For the first goal, Chris Cerda headed in a perfect Braulio Marquez corner kick on a maneuver the pair had discussed immediately before pulling it off successfully with just 8:47 remaining in the first half.

"I told Braulio I was going to count to five," said Cerda, who began the play standing right next to Marquez. "I told him to kick it when I get to five, and I would reverse course and try to head it in. So I started running toward the goal and counting, When I got to five, I spun back toward Braulio and he put the ball right there at head level, and I knocked it in. His pass was perfect." The two celebrated with a lengthy hug, and the Cavs had broken the scoreless deadlock.

It stayed 1-0 by halftime, largely on the strength of an amazing dive save by Crockett goalkeeper Noah Mayfield with 1:38 before intermission – but more on that young man later.

Early in the second half, Carter took a midfield clearing pass from Marquez, dribbled to the top of the goal box, and punched a shot past the Hornet keeper to make it 2-0 with 37:55 to play. A second goal should have provided a bit of breathing room for the visitors in a game this tight – but that's not how South Gibson operates.

Now in desperation mode, the Hornets kept the ball firing toward the Cav goal for virtually all of the remaining regulation time on the clock, peppering Mayfield from every conceivable angle. Yet he kept SGC off the scoreboard until a penalty kick was awarded with 17:44 remaining, and the opportunistic hosts cashed in on it.

The furious flurry of shots continued, and South Gibson managed to even the count when the Hornets booted in a rebound at the 10:57 mark. The momentum had completely shifted again, just as in the district tournament final. But Mayfield rose to the challenge, as evidenced by the staggering total of saves he accumulated in the tense contest: 17. They came in all varieties: leaping high to knock a shot over the crossbar, diving left or right to steal away a grounder, punching away or intercepting cross passes and corner kicks. Back line teammates Daniel Grajeda and Brandon Carcamo combined to prevent a second rebound goal after Mayfield had deflected a shot that took him out of position, and eventually the duel concluded with a 2-2 score.

That meant two 10-minute overtime periods, not the best news for a Crockett team that had just played 80 intense minutes of soccer the night before in the semifinal and 80 more in Wednesday's regulation. The Cavs were gassed, but in the short rest period that ensued, somehow Soriano's club found new life.

“The guys were pretty dejected coming off the field after the second half,” Soriano said. “There were some heads hanging. I didn’t really say a whole lot – just an encouragement to ‘be positive.’ The players took it from there. They were the ones who built each other back up and ready to play. They were NOT going to let this one get away this time.”

Crockett was playing without injured starters Angel Garcia and Max Utley, but Garcia had entered late in the second half to provide some midfield stability. He took the pitch for the first overtime period, and his leadership was evident.

“Luke and Angel are our captains,” Soriano said, “and when the extra time began, they showed WHY they are our captains.”

After the keepers from both squads had made a couple of stops apiece, Carter ran down a ball on the right sideline all the way to the corner before whipping a spectacular cross pass around his defender and straight to Cerda about 15 feet in front of the goal. The junior sharpshooter did not miss, and Crockett was back on top 3-2 with at the 2:47 mark of Overtime #1.

As play moved into the second extra period, South Gibson was trying its best to muster another desperation surge, but Mayfield and company kept turning the Hornets away. Eventually, Carter ran down another long ball on the left sideline this time, brought it to a halt, and saw Adrian Calderon streaking in from the right wing.

“I watched Luke run that ball down at the sideline,” Calderon said, “and when he looked up, I knew he was getting ready to lift a pass toward the goal box. So I took off and ran straight toward the keeper. All I was thinking was to slam it in with my head. I was going to do whatever it took. I’ve been waiting on a goal like that for a long time.”

Carter arched a perfectly-placed cross pass, and Calderon – just as he said – slammed it in with his head in the upper left corner. That ended the match at the 4:30 mark of the second overtime, and Calderon celebrated his clinching goal with a Brandi Chastain shirt removal.

The victory gave Crockett its fourth straight region tournament title, a streak begun by now-assistant Carli Branson, whose investment in the Cavalier programs has helped push Crockett to the forefront of West Tennessee teams.

“The Crockett community is unsurpassed in its support of the program,” Soriano said as he watched his players run past the fans, slapping hands and stopping for hugs. “It’s a big reason for our success. When our guys make up their minds that they really want to compete, good things happen. We’ll see what we’ve got for Saturday.”



Above: Aiden Markgraf (23) and Camden Martin (center) battle with a pair of South Gibson defenders for control of the ball in Wednesday's regional final. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Below: The ball (not pictured) is up in the air, but it's obvious from the look on Daniel Grajeda's face that a shot is coming. But goalkeeper Noah Mayfield kept his concentration strong... (Photo by Ron Barry)



Left: ... and consequently, this was a common scene all evening: Mayfield making a diving stop. The Cavalier keep had 17 saves on the night. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Left: After orchestrating the play on the sideline with Braulio Marquez -- who delivered the perfect corner kick -- Chris Cerda (far right) ran toward the goal, reversed his field, and used his head to successfully guide the ball (far left) past the Hornet keeper for the match's first goal. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Below: Chris Cerda runs over to Braulio Marquez to congratulate him on his perfectly-executed corner kick, allowing Cerda to put Crockett up 1-0 in the region tournament final. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Right: Early in the second half, Luke Carter took a clearing pass from Braulio Marquez, carried it upfield for a short while, and then prepared to launch... (Photo by Ron Barry)



Below: ... this bullet of a shot, which zoomed straight past the Hornet keeper with 37:55 to play, giving the Cavs a 2-0 lead. Luke Carter is one of the Crockett captains this season. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Right: Luke Carter's goal prompted this celebratory gathering of (left to right): Diego Marquez, Cam Martin (5), Mason Wood (7), Braulio Marquez, and Brandon Carcamo (14). (Photo by Ron Barry)



Above: The previously-injured co-captain Angel Garcia entered the contest late in regulation and provided stability and leadership in the middle for the Cavs during the overtime periods. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Left: In the first overtime, Chris Cerda took a sideline crossing pass from Luke Carter and drilled this shot from directly in front of the net. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Below: Once he sees it's in the net -- while the South Gibson defenders react in shocked disbelief -- Chris Cerda races to the sideline from which he received Luke Carter's assist. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Left: Crockett kept its 3-2 lead at the end of the first overtime because of this great defensive play by both Daniel Grajeda and Brandon Carcamo, who simultaneously kick this deflection (after a Noah Mayfield save) away from the net. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Above: The match was sealed in the second overtime when Adrian Calderon (17) came streaking in from the right wing to head this pass from Luke Carter past Hornet keeper Kooper McFarland, giving Crockett the 4-2 win. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Right: After Adrian Calderon sees the ball hit the netting, he's off to the right corner to begin his "Brandi Chastain" celebration... (Photo by Ron Barry)





Left: The Crockett shirt's coming off after Adrian Calderon scored the clinching goal with which he said he wanted to "seal" the championship. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Right: "I've been waiting for a goal like this for a long time," said Adrian Calderon, who left an indelible mark on the memories of the Cavalier fans who witnessed the team's fourth straight region championship. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Below: As the officials head off the field them, a very excited Chris Cerda locks hands with Braulio Marquez as the two prepare to extend their hug time from the first half... (Photo by Ron Barry)



Above: Adrian Calderon's tally ignited a wild celebration from the sideline, with first-year coach Joey Soriano right in the center of it. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Above: ... and here it is. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Above: Crockett players ran over to their fans to slap hands and say "thanks." Joey Soriano calls the Cavalier soccer community "unsurpassed." (Photo by Ron Barry)

Left: And so... it's a FOUR-PEAT! Crockett wins its fourth consecutive region tournament championship. A Saturday sectional victory sends them to the TSSAA State Tournament. (Photo by Ron Barry)

