

EPIC GAME CONCLUDES BASEBALL SEASON, BUT CAVALIERS PUSH HORNETS TO 12 INNINGS

By Ron Barry

I had a friend who was a big baseball player
Back in high school
He could throw that speedball by you
Make you look like a fool, boy
-- Bruce Springsteen, "Glory Days"

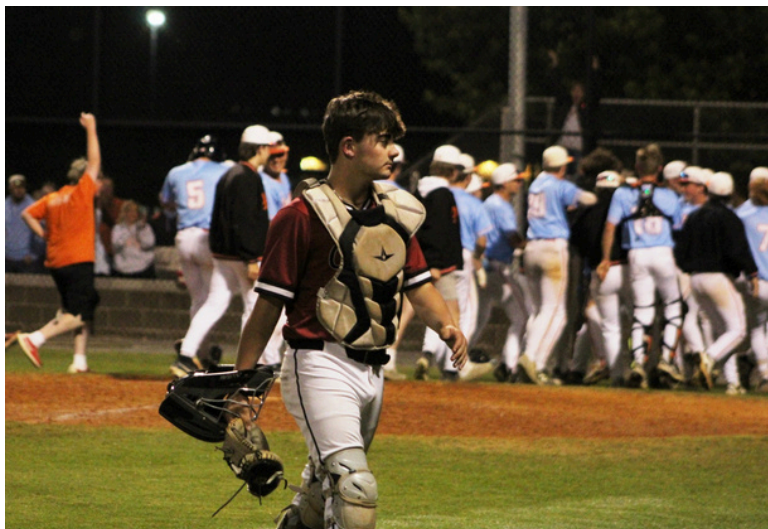
It was the kind of game about which a future musician will write a song. And at the twentieth reunion of the Crockett County class of 2025, it's a pretty safe bet that somebody will ask, "Hey, do you remember that district tournament baseball game against South Gibson in Newbern?"

In one of the most classic high school games that will ever be played in West Tennessee, South Gibson County defeated Crockett's Cavaliers 1-0 in 12 intense innings on a mammoth walk-off home run by MTSU signee Tommy Baker - the only appropriate way a contest of this caliber should end.

So many drama-packed, scoreless games conclude on a wild pitch, or a passed ball, or a throwing error, or a bases-loaded hit batsman. Not this one. The baseball gods were not about to let the brilliance of this game be smudged by a killer mistake.

Instead, it was a mighty swing by one of West Tennessee's standout players - and, ironically, off a pitch delivered by his summer travel ball teammate Carter Winders, with whom he won a national championship tournament. Baker's moon shot ripped through the cool night air in Newbern like a comet uninterested in landing anywhere anytime soon.

But lest anyone in the Cavalier fan base seek to toss blame in Winders' direction, let's establish a few facts before you cast your first stone.



Left: Dejected but keeping his head held high, Crockett reserve catcher Luke Beard walks off the field as South Gibson's walk-off celebration goes on behind him. Beard entered a pressure-packed situation in the eighth inning and performed well to the epic battle's conclusion. (Photo by Ron Barry)...

Winders, Crockett's marvelous regular catcher, was in his 19th inning of baseball on Monday night. He had caught the 14 previous frames the Cavs played (the equivalent of two full games) prior to taking the mound in relief of Tyler Rathbun - a young man who will have legendary status by the time that 2045 reunion rolls around. But more on him later.

As Rathbun was entering his seventh inning against the Hornets, Crockett interim head coach Cody Dew had already decided that if the game was still deadlocked at 0-0, he would go to Winders for the remainder. Yet as he watched the frame unfold, he saw Winders take a foul tip directly on his throwing hand. As the umpire gave the Cav backstop a minute to recover, Dew had to be wondering if Winders could even throw now.

Answer: yes, he could. And when he took the mound, he proceeded to mow down one of the best lineups in West Tennessee in the eighth, ninth, tenth, and eleventh innings, with nary a reference to the fact his hand had to be throbbing by that point.

And, he'd retired the first two batters in the twelfth before Baker launched a 2-1 pitch into the history books - and may have earned himself a statue in Medina sometime in the future.

Now, back to Rathbun. The senior's had quite a week, signing with Bethel University to continue his baseball career next year and then celebrating that signing by shutting out Obion County 10-0 Saturday in five brilliant innings in the first elimination game the Cavaliers faced in this District 13-AAA Tournament.

That put Crockett against Dyersburg in Monday evening's first elimination game, which the Cavs won easily 10-1 as lefthander Brady Fronabarger struck out 13 Trojans and hit a triple and home run to spark the offense as well. Winders, Bryson Vance, and Landry Fronabarger had two hits apiece in that one in support.

So Crockett advanced to its next elimination game, this time with a Region 7-AAA Tournament berth on the line. The loser would go home, the winner would live to play for another week at the least.

The opponent would be South Gibson, which originally put the Cavs in the losers bracket with a 7-6 comeback win on Thursday night.

Dew elected to start Rathbun on one day's rest, a decision softened by the fact that he'd only thrown 45 pitches to dispose of Obion County on Saturday, a feat of Greg Maddux proportions. Winders could be ready if he faltered.

As you have probably surmised by now, Rathbun didn't falter. In fact, he carried a no-hitter into that seventh inning, when South Gibson left fielder Cameron Alford finally broke the ice with a line-drive single to center to start the frame for the home team on the scoreboard.

After a flyout, Hornet starting pitcher Aiden Moore hit a shot into the hole between third and short on which Crockett's Mason Ray made a spectacular diving stop, keeping Alford from advancing any further than second - a key to the game continuing into extra innings.

The next batter loaded the bases on an infield grounder which went for an error. If not for Ray's play on the previous hit, it would have ended the contest. Instead, Rathbun bowed up and struck out a pinch-hitter and then got Baker to ground out to second baseman Aiden Austin, keeping the game scoreless. He took a seat in the dugout having thrown 102 pitches - and earned the respect of every observer.

As intense as the first seven frames had been, it ratcheted up even more in the extras. That the game was so well-played was a testament to the young men playing it. Neither team threatened in the eighth, although South Gibson lost an opportunity when Chad Allen hit a ball off his foot while in the batters box that bounced over to Cav third baseman Preston Lambert, who threw him out at first while Allen (legitimately) appealed to the umpires that the ball should be dead. They didn't agree, and the game continued.

Neither team mounted a scare in the ninth, but in the bottom of the tenth, Winders issued a couple of walks back-to-back, but pitched out of it with an infield fly and a groundout to push the duel to the eleventh.

Crockett finally got something going when Winders drew a one-out walk. Courtesy runner Garet Rawson entered as Cade Freeman then deftly dropped a bunt far enough down the third-base line that SGC's Alford made a dive for it in the air, but it bounced off the ground first and then off his head as his cap and sunglasses - which were atop his cap bill - went flying. It gave the Cavs two runners on, with still just one out. But relief hurler Gage Nesbitt produced a strikeout and a foul pop, and the battle went on.

In the bottom of the eleventh, South Gibson's Jackson Isley led off with a solid single to center. Alford then placed an effective sacrifice bunt, with Crockett reserve catcher Luke Beaird pouncing on it and gunning him out at first - but it put a runner in scoring position. Jack Bradberry smacked a one-hop smash up the middle, but Winders made a remarkable spear of it and smartly turned to third, where he threw out the lead runner for the second out.

But Bradberry stole second on the next pitch to again get the winning run in scoring position. He didn't score, however, as Ray fielded a ground ball and threw out the batter at first. To the twelfth they'd go.

Crockett went down in order in the top of the frame. The Hornets then made two quick outs, but then Baker supplied his heroics to send South Gibson into the championship series against host Dyer County.

"I can't ask any more of these guys that what they gave tonight," Dew said after the encounter. "When I came into this about 10 days ago, they could have folded the tent and just quit. But they didn't. They competed. They competed tonight against one of the best teams in West Tennessee. Tyler pitched as well as he could, and Carter made it tough on them too. Especially for a guy in his 19th inning of the day. I'm extremely proud of all these guys. I don't think anyone that watched this game will forget it anytime soon."

Winders drew three walks for the Cavs. Brady Fronabarger - who made two brilliant defensive plays to keep the game extended earlier - had a hit and a walk as the only other Crockett player to earn his way on base twice.

[Note: Reports on other Monday Crockett sports action will be posted later today or added to Tuesday's summary. Crockett's softball team defeated Dyersburg 7-4 and play Dyer County tonight; Crockett's track team set several school records in the West Sectional Monday, with Claire Evans, Addie Davidson, Avery Thornton, and Alivia Hale winning the West Tennessee championship in the 4x800 relay, earning a berth in the TSSAA State Meet, and several boys qualified for the Sectional finals scheduled for today; and Izzy Yearwood won her first two district tournament singles matches in tennis.]

Below: Tyler Rathbun, pitching on a single day's rest, carried a no-hitter into the seventh inning against South Gibson's talented lineup. (Photo by Ron Barry)...



Right: The craziest play in the game came when South Gibson's Brock Beasley (33) tried to steal second. Catcher Carter Winders' throw sailed off the glove off second baseman Aiden Austin and into centerfield, from where Callan Willis air-mailed a toss over third base to the fence. Beasley, trying to round third, may have gotten tangled up with the base umpire and tripped, but ended up in a rundown before Crockett's Preston Lambert (3) tagged him out and then fell down behind Winders...



Above: By the end of the seventh, Tyler Rathbun was spent. In between his innings, he would walk down the left-field line and douse his head with water to stay cool. Rathbun twirled 12 scoreless frames in the district tournament. (Photo by Ron Barry)...



Left: Earlier in the day, Brady Fronabarger slugged this massive home run and a triple... (Photo by Ron Barry)...

Below: ... and also struck out 13 while tossing a complete-game four-hitter as Crockett eliminated Dyersburg in a 10-1 romp. (Photo by Ron Barry)...



Left: Cade Freeman managed to get a bunt down on this pitch for a single in extra innings, moving a man into scoring position as well, but the Cavaliers could not capitalize against South Gibson. (Photo by Ron Barry)...



Below: Carter Winders took a direct hit on his throwing hand on a foul tip in the bottom of the seventh, but still threw four-and-two-thirds innings of shutout baseball until SGC's Tommy Baker drilled the walk-off. (Photo by Ron Barry)...



Left: Cav senior Gareth Rawson got into scoring position in the eleventh, but Crockett hitters couldn't follow up and deliver him home. (Photo by Ron Barry)...

Below: Lady Cav catcher Madison Solis slams her fifth straight hit in her last two district tournament games on this pitch, concluding a 3-for-3 day as Crockett eliminated Dyersburg 7-4. (Photo by Ron Barry)...



Above: Mason Ray's remarkable diving stop on this grounder saved a potential run and extended the game into a few more extra innings. (Photo by Ron Barry)...

Right: Izzy Yearwood won her first two singles matches Monday at the district tennis tournament. (Photo by Ron Barry)...



Far Right: Claire Evans, Addie Davidson, Avery Thornton, and Alivia Hale set a new school record in winning the West Tennessee championship in the 4x800 relay Monday, qualifying for the TSSAA State Meet. (Photo by Julie Nass)...

