

## CROCKETT VOLLEYBALL HEADED TO STATE TOURNAMENT FOR FIFTH TIME IN SEVEN YEARS



**Above:** Audrey Whitby (center) is jumping for joy with teammates (from left) Wesley Thornton, Darcy Puffer, Keeton Holyfield, and Katherine West after the Lady Cavaliers clinched their third straight State Tournament berth. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Every quality sports team needs a stabilizing influence. While the “rah-rah” guys often get most of the attention, it’s more often the quiet stabilizer that benefits the team the most.

For Crockett County volleyball, that stabilizer is senior hitter Keeton Holyfield.

That fact was never more on display than on Thursday night, when Coach Andrew Laman’s Lady Cavaliers faced their third “win-or-go-home” situation in the last two weeks. A loss in any one of those three matches would have ended Crockett’s season.

Instead, the Lady Cavs will be heading to Murfreesboro next week to the TSSAA State Tournament for the fifth time in the last seven seasons – and third straight – after surviving a three-set war with host Covington in a West Sectional duel that was within a few points of going either way.

Yet every time Crockett needed a point in a key situation, it seemed that Holyfield – in her steady, dependable, almost stoic manner – was right in the middle of it, mixing a clutch block or two with a number of pounding putaways. And when it was over – by a count of 25-22, 25-22, and 25-18 – the Lady Cavs prevailed, earning a berth in the State’s Elite Eight.

While Laman acknowledged it was a total team effort – and Holyfield herself would concur – the redheaded senior played with a fire that surpassed even her hair color. Holyfield finished many of the key points in all three sets, but was especially the calm in the storm when Crockett was on the verge of blowing a lopsided lead in Set 2.

Yet her performance was just one of several outstanding efforts from Lady Cav players, who – except for an uncharacteristic stretch of service errors in Set 1 – played one of their best matches of the year against a formidable foe.

“This was a total team effort all the way around,” Laman said afterward. “Our hitters were great tonight, but we don’t get that without great sets and passes – and we had that working too. We didn’t serve well in Set 1, but we were all right after that. And every girl on the bench brought energy and support, and that’s a very underrated part of good teams. These girls deserve the State Tournament berth they just earned.”

Holyfield admitted that during the warm-up Thursday night, she had a fleeting thought that her volleyball career could end on this night.

“I thought about it when we first started,” she said, “but it didn’t last long. Once we start playing, I don’t ever think we’re going to lose.”

Fellow seniors Deonna Cole and Katherine West said they never felt the issue was in doubt Thursday night, despite the closeness of the scores.

“Every time we step on the court, I don’t think we’re going to lose,” Cole said, “even if we do. It just doesn’t cross my mind.”

West was already focused post-match on heading to the State.

“We have a lot of confidence in each other when we’re playing,” she said. “And this State Tournament is going to be the last one for us seniors. None of us are going to play volleyball in college, so this will be it. We need to play hard, have fun, and enjoy the experience.”

It was fitting that each of those three hitters nailed the final point of all three sets. Holyfield slammed home the first, Cole wrapped up the second with a bomb, and West hammered the shot that clinched Set 3. The first set was close all the way; Crockett almost blew leads of 10-2 and 20-11 in the second before nailing it down; and the third was 20-16 until Crockett established a little breathing room, courtesy of kills by Holyfield and Cole.

The Lady Cavs' back row play was also solid, despite being tested all night by Covington's amazing junior whiz Ava McCalla, who pounded shot after shot from all over the court for the Lady Chargers. But her efforts were countered effectively enough by Darcy Puffer, Audrey Whitby, Wesley Thornton, Addie Davidson, and West, while Lakyn Forsythe reliably provided the sets for the hitters.

Crockett, now 29-9, will be joined at the State Tournament by Class AA contenders Dyer County, Creek Wood, Valor Collegiate Prep, Upperman, Signal Mountain, Chuckey-Doak, and Sullivan East. Play begins Tuesday at Rockvale High School just outside Murfreesboro. A new format this year – not popular with a sizeable number of the state's coaches – sends every team into a consolation bracket after its first loss. Those teams will then be playing for no better than third place.

**SOCCER:** Five different Crockett County players were honored at Thursday night's district championship match at Dyersburg. Rebecca Waddey, Chloe Campbell, and goalkeeper Hannah Wede were named to the All-District Team for their play during the regular season, and freshmen Ruth Gourley and Caroline Scruggs were selected to the All-Tournament Team. The Lady Cavs finished the season with a record of 7-5-2.

**Below:** Keeton Holyfield was super-charged Thursday night (see the lightning coming out of her right arm), leading Crockett to its straight-set (but close) sectional win over Covington. (Photo by Ron Barry)



**Right:** Katherine West (3) played one of her best matches of the season, hammering home this point to help the Lady Cavs secure the triumph. (Photo by Ron Barry)



**Below:** Deonna Cole stretches to full extension to steer this tough touch shot into an open area on the Covington side of the court for a Lady Cav point. (Photo by Ron Barry)



**Right:** Senior Darcy Puffer wasn't going to let her volleyball career end Thursday night, making several incredible saves on chasesdowns to keep Crockett points alive. (Photo by Ron Barry)



**Below:** Libero Addie Davidson goes low to dig this Covington serve and keep it in play for the Crockett offense. (Photo by Ron Barry)





**Above:** Dependable setter Lakyn Forsythe was all business in Crockett's first set Thursday night, ... (Photo by Ron Barry)

**Below:** ... but sooner or later, close proximity to Wesley Thornton (right) is going to produce something goofy that brings laughter to Forsythe's demeanor. (Photo by Ron Barry)



**Right:** Deonna Cole -- when she wasn't smashing winners herself (and she had several) -- kept her teammates encouraged as always. (Photo by Ron Barry)



**Left:** Wesley Thornton, of course, does more on the court than make Lakyn Forsythe laugh, including a stepped-up service game that set up the match's final point against Covington. (Photo by Ron Barry)

**Below:** Keeton Holyfield played out of her mind Thursday night, perhaps motivated by her brief warm-up thought that her career could end in this match. But smashes like this ensured that it wouldn't. (Photo by Ron Barry)



**Above:** For Crockett to win the sectional, Katherine West had to perform well from the back row as well as the front -- and she passed the test with distinction. (Photo by Ron Barry)



**Above:** Audrey Whitby's service game is always a key for Crockett's success, and she consistently delivered against the Lady Chargers in the sectional. (Photo by Ron Barry)



**Left:** If one of Crockett's senior mashers don't get you from the front row -- or District Hitter of the Year Wesley Thornton -- the Lady Cavs can throw junior Madi Collins at you, seen here blasting a kill at a key point. (Photo by Ron Barry)

**Below:** When the final point clicked onto the Covington gymnasium scoreboard, Crockett had its sectional victory and entry into the TSSAA State Tournament next week in Rockvale, ... (Photo by Ron Barry)



**Above:** As Crockett's crowd rejoices in the outcome, Coach Andrew Laman congratulates his players with a high five down the line. From left: Lola Bailey, Carmen Claybrooks, Ava Lee, Deonna Cole, Laman, Addie Davidson (behind Laman), Darcy Puffer, Ellie Henderson, Keeton Holyfield, and Katherine West. (Photo by Ron Barry)



**Above:** ... producing smiles all around for the Lady Cavaliers and their fans. (Photo by Ron Barry)



**Above:** It's a grateful day to be a Cavalier! (Photo by Ron Barry)