

RESILIENT LADY CAVS ADVANCE IN TSSAA STATE VOLLEYBALL TOURNAMENT



Above: Darcy Puffer (center) is flanked by Katherine West, Addie Davidson, and Audrey Whitby (right) as the Lady Cavaliers celebrate the final point of their opening-round win over Sullivan East. (Photo by Ron Barry)

All early signs were pointing toward a rough day for Crockett County's volleyballers Tuesday – and none of them had anything to do with their opponent (at least, not yet).

Coach Andrew Laman had his Lady Cavaliers in the Rockvale High School gymnasium by 11:00 for a noon start against Sullivan East in the opening round of the TSSAA State Tournament. Since the 9:30 match had already concluded, Laman had his team warming up out on the floor until he was informed by event officials that they couldn't start warming up until 30 minutes before the contest. So off the floor they came.

As 11:30 came around, Crockett went back out on the floor and were into their warm-up routine when they were then told they had to take their warm-up tops off – during warm-ups.

When noon arrived, the teams took the court for public address introductions. Once the starters remained on the floor, game officials approached Laman and informed him that the Lady Cavs were somehow in violation of the uniform code. He was told that maroon and black (the shirts were maroon, with black numbers, clearly outlined in white) were not "contrasting colors" and therefore weren't legitimate for the competition – despite the fact, as Laman calmly explained, the team had worn the exact same uniform in the previous two State tournaments.

The coach was given two options: either change the uniform tops or accept an "administrative red card," a penalty which would give Sullivan East a free point and the serve as the match began. Since alternate uniform tops for most of the girls were back at the hotel, a change wasn't possible; it might have been if one of the officials had told the team earlier, when someone could have run over there and brought them back. But they didn't.

That was just the beginning of the sudden enforcement of rules stranger than a politician telling the truth. A couple of points into the match, Crockett's players were told they were "standing too close to each other" during serves. Right after that, they were told they couldn't stand at the net with their arms raised during a serve; they had to bring them down. Keep in mind, Crockett's team has been doing these things for years, and no one has ever said "boo" to them about it – not even this close to Halloween.

It's not how you want to begin your squad's State tournament experience.

Yet – somehow – the resilient Lady Cavs posted a 22-25, 25-22, 25-22, and 25-21 comeback win over the talented Lady Patriots, giving Laman his first State tournament victory as a head coach.

"I'm so proud of these girls," Laman said after the match. "They could have folded several times during the match. They could have folded right from the start. But they kept their composure, they fought through a lot of tough points, and when they began to sense that things might be swinging our way in the fourth set, they stepped up and played to win rather than not to lose. I think Sullivan East may have fallen into the 'playing not to lose' trap near the end, and it cost them." Laman had particular praise for senior Audrey Whitby, who was the server on match point for all three sets the Lady Cavs won.

"Audrey's serve won us a lot of points today," Laman said. "She had some good runs for us, and got us back in a couple of those sets when we had fallen behind." Crockett also got a boost midway in the fourth set from a service run by Addie Davidson, who crossed up the Sullivan East power hitters with softer serves that were finding holes in their defense.

Despite all the distractions in Set 1, Crockett actually fought to a 12-9 lead before the Lady Patriots rode the power arm of Sophie Johnson to take a 21-17 advantage. Johnson, booming a topspin serve that knuckled at times and dove like a baseball sinker at others, fired cannon shot after cannon shot until Sullivan East prevailed 25-22.

But in Set 2, Crockett's girls rallied early, zooming to a 9-3 edge before the Lady Patriots closed to within a point three times: at 13-12, 14-13, and 23-22. Katherine West hammered home the final point, however, and Crockett eked out a 25-22 triumph.

With the match now even, Set 3 was tied at 7-7 after a Deonna Cole smash until Sullivan ran off 10 of the next 14 points to seize a 17-11 advantage. Crockett fought back again, tying it at 20-20 on a Madi Collins kill and then hanging on to win 25-22 again when Wesley Thornton put away the final point.

Set 4 was a war. Sullivan East jumped ahead 6-3; the Lady Cavs fought back again to tie it at 9-9 before Davidson's service run pushed Crockett ahead 15-10. The Lady Patriots rebounded to tie it at 16-16, and it stayed close as Keeton Holyfield nailed a winner to make it 20-18, Crockett. Another Thornton kill gave the Lady Cavs a 23-19 lead, but Sullivan East scored the next two to tighten it up again. But Whitby regained the serve at 23-21 and produced successive gems, with the final one being concluded by a vicious Thornton pounding from the middle that ricocheted off a Lady Patriot blocker into the scorer's table.

That sends Crockett into a 9:30 morning match Wednesday against vaunted Valor Prep, the highest-ranked team in the tournament and carrier of a 28-3 record. The Lady Cavs reached 30 wins with their victory in the first round, against just nine defeats on the season.



Left: Audrey Whitby played a key role for Crockett Tuesday, serving the match points in all three sets won by the Lady Cavs and providing opportune digs when necessary. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Below: Coach Andrew Laman picked up his first State tournament victory as a head coach with the four-set win. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Below: Lakyn Forsythe senses the Lady Cavs are getting close to finishing off the final set. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Left: Wesley Thornton smashed this point off a Sullivan East blocker to close out the third set for a 25-22 triumph. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Right: Addie Davidson ran down this carom in the second set and blasted it backward to keep the point alive for Crockett. (Photo by Ron Barry)





Above: Crockett enjoyed some enthusiastic support from this group of students who made the trek to Rockvale, engaging in some good-natured back-and-forth with the Lady Patriot student fans. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Below: Katherine West stoops low to dig a Lady Patriot serve midway through Tuesday's match. (Photo by Ron Barry)

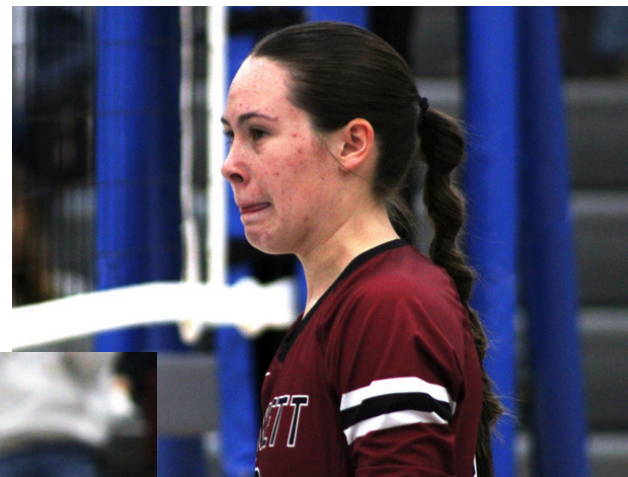


Left: Deonna Cole recorded several kills in the second set, helping turn the match around in Crockett's favor. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Below: Keeton Holyfield had some key serves down the stretch in both the third and fourth sets for Crockett and also played effectively at the net. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Below: Madi Collins had a huge kill shot to tie the third set up at 20-20 and help rally the Lady Cavs from a six-point deficit. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Left: After she ended Set 3 with a thunderous smash, the normally stoic Wesley Thornton let out a surprising roar as her teammates gathered around. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Left: Addie Davidson, Lakyn Forsythe, and Darcy Puffer echo the emotion shown by Wesley Thornton after the third-set clincher. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Below: Lakyn Forsythe belts this serve from in front of the student section. Crockett's serving accuracy was a major factor in its victory over Sullivan East. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Above: This was the sight Crockett fans loved to see when their team has 24 points in a particular set: Audrey Whitby's service game has been on target throughout the post-season. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Above: Now it's on to face top seed Valor Prep, where Wesley Thornton and company will get tested to the hilt. Can they pull the upset? Round 2 begins Wednesday morning at 9:30. (Photo by Ron Barry)