

IMPRESSIVE VALOR PREP SENDS CROCKETT VOLLEYBALLERS TO STATE LOSERS BRACKET



Above: Teammates congratulate Keeton Holyfield after making a stuff block on a Valor Prep kill attempt in the fourth set of Wednesday's State tournament. From left: Audrey Whitby (partially hidden), Wesley Thornton, Darcy Puffer, Holyfield, Lakyn Forsythe (11), and Katherine West. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Imagine, if you will, that a judge has sentenced you to face a firing squad for your crimes, but rather than being blindfolded and facing rifle bullets, you will have a full view of a bunch of Amazonian women pelting you with cannon-velocity volleyballs.

That must be what it feels like to be an opponent of Valor Prep at the TSSAA State Volleyball Tournament.

Wednesday morning, it was Crockett County's turn to experience the high-speed peppering from the defending state champion Lady Wildcats, who improved to 29-3 and moved into Friday's title match by dispatching the Lady Cavaliers 25-16, 25-9, and 25-19.

So domineering is the Nashville-based school that Crockett – which battled the Lady Wildcats gamely – considered it a major moral victory when it rallied in the third set and actually forced Valor Prep to call a timeout when the Lady Cavs pulled within a point at 16-15.

Unfortunately for Coach Andrew Laman's club, Valor scored the next point, which enabled it to then turn the serve over to junior phenom Anarela Mejias, who proceeded to bomb the Crockett defense for seven straight tallies before missing on the eighth try. Crockett then scored four straight, highlighted by a pair of team stuff blocks by Keeton Holyfield and Madi Collins, before the Lady Wildcats pounded its final kill.

"Another level," Laman smiled while slowly shaking his head. "They're just so good. And several of them have the athletic ability and stature of college athletes. They can hit the ball so hard, but it also goes where they want it to. When a team can do it as consistently as they do, all you can do is tip your hat and acknowledge it."

So what IS it like to actually face their serves and their kills from the back row?

"Honestly, the best return I made all day was on one when I just shut my eyes," laughed Crockett senior Audrey Whitby. The best news of the morning for the Lady Cavs – in addition to actually being fairly competitive in two of the three sets – was that no one got injured, even though at one point Crockett's Wesley Thornton had visible red marks on her neck area from being hit with Valor's rocket shots.

Even when a team manages to stay close to Valor on the scoreboard, that can change in a heartbeat when the serve comes around to Mejias. She launches the ball 25-30 feet in the air, runs toward the line, times her jump perfectly, and then pounds a diving topspin ball at a speed comparable to Olympic levels.

While her serve helped the winners pull away in Set 3, following the Valor timeout, it was even more evident in Set 2. Crockett seemed to be gaining a little confidence after scoring six of the last 11 points in Set 1, and was right in the mix in Set 2, trailing 6-5. By the time the Lady Cavs got their sixth point, the Lady Wildcats had 15. The Valor lead went from 6-5 to 19-7 in the blink of an eye.

Mejias isn't Valor's only threat, either. Sophomore hitter Jentelle McNairl is a beast at the net, and the Lady Wildcats have tall and effective blockers when their opponents try a smash against them. None of them may actually be from the Amazon, but they look and play as if they have extra powers.

Valor will now take on Dyer County Friday in a rematch of last year's state championship. The Lady Choctaws downed Creek Wood in four sets to earn their finals berth.

Crockett, now 30-10, will play at noon Thursday against the winner of the Chuckey-Doak vs. Upperman match, played Wednesday evening. If the Lady Cavs win, they'll play again at 5:00 for the tournament's third-place finish.

MIDDLE SCHOOL BASKETBALL: Both CCMS teams split their first two games of the season in the Blue Suede Tournament in Medina, with the boys bouncing back from a Saturday loss to Trenton (previously reported) by defeating TCA Tuesday by the lopsided score of 51-8. The girls opened with a 40-16 win over Trenton, but then fell to TCA's Lady Lions 45-29.

CCMS Boys 51, TCA 8

Crockett – Jayce Cobb 7, Roman Barker 7, Kamden Lewis 6, Brenden Green 5, Messiah McCurry 4, Cade Reasons 4, Jaylen Frye 3, Luke Elrod 3, Evan Bailey 3, Jordan Young 2, Easten Stephens 2, Theo Lawrence 2, Ryder Sanderlin 2, Jaden Garcia 1. 2-Pt FG: 14. 3-Pt FG: 6 (Frye, Cobb, Barker, Green, Elrod, Bailey). FT: 5-8. Record: 1-1.

TCA – Nash Warren 4, Jacob Dooley 2, Yabi Castles 2. 2-Pt FG: 4. 3-Pt FG: 0. FT: 0-0.
CCMS Girls 40, Trenton 16

Crockett – Addie Whitby 13, Trin Pankey 10, Addison Ward 7, Till Holyfield 4, Madison Cathey 4, Karmen Savage 2. 2-Pt FG: 14. 3-Pt FG: 3 (Whitby, Holyfield, Ward). FT: 3-12. Record: 1-0.

Trenton – Eryce Mayberry 5, Jaden Simmons 3, Nevaeh Simon 3, Aubrey Olson 2, Klaya Murphy 2, Aniyah Patterson 1. 2-Pt FG: 5. 3-Pt FG: 0. FT: 6-14.

TCA 45, CCMS Girls 29

Crockett – Trin Pankey 10, Khylee Cobb 9, Addie Whitby 4, Till Holyfield 4, Larelai Grissam 2. 2-Pt FG: 13. 3-Pt FG: 0. FT: 3-5. Record: 1-1.

TCA – Jenna Warren 24, Hatley Vinson 6, Abby Porter 6, H Pritchett 4, Ellie Vance 2, Grace Copley 2, Farrah Carson 1. 2-Pt FG: 20. 3-Pt FG: 1 (Warren). FT: 2-3.



Left: The historic moment captured on the scoreboard: When Crockett actually forced Valor Prep to call timeout in the third set with a consecutive points rally. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Right: Audrey Whitby (left) and Keeton Holyfield talk between sets. Sometimes all you can do is smile and tip your cap to the opponent. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Below: Crockett's Wesley Thornton actually has red marks on her neck from Valor Prep's shots hitting her during Wednesday's match. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Below: Lakyn Forsythe checks to make sure all her teeth are still in there after taking a Valor Prep bomb to the head at Wednesday's State Tournament. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Below: Darcy Puffer tries to keep the Lady Cavs from getting discouraged as they rallied to make it close in Set 3. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Above: Crockett libero Addie Davidson wears a pensive look on her face as she awaits the next rocket from the Lady Wildcats. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Above: Deonna Cole had to dive near the bleachers to try to fetch a carom from another hard Valor Prep blast ... (Photo by Ron Barry)



Left: The main problem for Crockett was the stunning play from junior Lady Wildcat Anarela Mejias. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Below: Anarela Mejias was particularly unstoppable with her Olympic-style serve, in which she'd launch the ball well into the air, time her jump perfectly (as the large Valor student section begins a "Whoop!" yell), ... (Photo by Ron Barry)

Below: ... and then then belt the stew out of it considerable topspin, causing it to dive-bomb at the feet of the Lady Cavalier back row defenders. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Right: ... and decided she might as well laugh about it, because sometimes there's just nothing you can do when the power gets cranked up. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Below: This attempted slam by Katherine West shows how difficult it was to get an effective shot past the Lady Wildcat front line, although Crockett managed it on several occasions. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Left: Crockett had its moments and was competitive in two of the three sets, such as when Wesley Thornton delivered the Lady Wildcats a little bit of their own medicine. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Far Left: Deonna Cole got this shot to clear the front row and drop in front of the back line for a clear winner. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Left: Keeton Holyfield and friends are expecting better things Thursday when they play at noon on the road to a shot at third place in the tournament. (Photo by Ron Barry)