

LADY CAV VOLLEYBALLERS REACH FINAL FOUR AT TSSAA STATE TOURNAMENT



Above: Crockett County's history-making Lady Cavaliers: fourth place at the State Tournament (highest finish ever) and first Lady Cav team to win two matches at a single State Tournament. Front row (from left): Aubrey Whitby, Addie Davidson, Lakyn Forsythe, Darcy Puffer, and Ellie Henderson. Back row (left to right): Carmen Claybrooks, Lola Bailey, Emilee Chandler, Deonna Cole, Keeton Holyfield, Katherine West, Wesley Thornton, Madi Collins, and Ava Lee. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Six Crockett County seniors ended their volleyball careers Thursday, and all they got to show for it was... SCHOOL HISTORY.

For the first time ever – despite a long record of success in the sport – the Lady Cavaliers won two matches in the TSSAA State Tournament and finished fourth, the school's best post-season showing. They did it with one of the gutsiest and nerve racking performances of the week at Rockvale High School near Murfreesboro when Crockett knocked off East Tennessee powerhouse Chuckey-Doak 25-22, 24-26, 25-16, and 25-21 with what second-year head coach Andrew Laman called "a total team effort."

Winning the first set after trailing 11-2 with a sluggish start that Laman attributed to "maybe overconfidence," and then rallying from behind again in both Sets 3 and 4, Crockett earned its way into the consolation bracket finals Thursday night against Creek Wood from Dickson County, but fell in straight sets to the Charlotte-based squad.

The triumph over Chuckey-Doak will long be remembered by players and fans alike for the tenacity with which both teams played. Laman will remember it as validation that Crockett County belongs at this event, for reasons perhaps best explained by his mentor and current assistant coach Bobby Rawson, the long-time former head coach of the program.

"When we first qualified for the State, they put the eight teams in two pools of four," Rawson said. "You played all the other teams in your pool, and then you'd be seeded against the other pool members. We would go 0-3 and then get placed against the top team from the other pool, so we'd be heading home embarrassed. And it was that way for a while. We finally had a team that won a set. Then in 2019 we finally won our first match, then again in 2020, and again in 2023. I talked to a coach from Portland – which used to make it here every year – and he told me they always hoped they'd draw a team from West Tennessee. But then he said he didn't feel that way anymore."

So now Laman and assistants Rawson and Lanie Riley have won twice at the State event for the first time, but there's an even more impressive slant to this 31-11 team when you check its strength of schedule. Five of the losses have come against the two teams playing Friday in the championship game. Two more came against Mississippi teams that are playing for the title in that state.

And by the way: Crockett plays in the only district in the state that placed two teams in this year's Final Four.

"I'm so proud of this team," Laman said. "They fought back from that bad start. They never quit the day before against Valor Prep. Today I was especially happy with the way our back row people played, because they kept us in a lot of points and made it possible for our hitters to do their thing." He was primarily referring to Audrey Whitby, Addie Davidson, Darcy Puffer, Wesley Thornton, Katherine West, and Deonna Cole – not to mention setter Lakyn Forsythe, who chases balls all over the court on any given point if necessary.

The battle with Chuckey-Doak was notable not just for the long, exciting points and the tightness of the match, but for the Lady Cavs' mindset that they simply were not going to lose.

"Before we went into the Chuckey-Doak game, I knew we would have to play hard to win," West said. "I also knew that if we won we would make school history. I never thought we would lose. My main goal was to help the team and myself get over mistakes quickly, and honestly just have fun."

"I never thought we were going to lose," Whitby echoed. "I was confident in my team and was motivated by the coaches and teammates."

"My thought process during the Chuckey-Doak game was pretty clear," said hitter Keeton Holyfield. "Even when we got down I never had a thought that we would lose. I felt motivated and lifted up by my teammates and the families in the stands."

"I was motivated to do my best by my teammates' cheers and motivating statements," Puffer added. "Being on this team felt more like a family than a team." That's a sentiment you hear often from these players.

They stuck together like a family in the first set after sleepwalking to a 11-2 deficit. Crockett trailed all the way until finally tying it up at 19-all and never led by more than a point until Cole belted a kill for a 24-22 advantage. Thornton's smash on the following point gave the Lady Cavs the comeback win.

In Set 2, though, Crockett once led 12-9 but let it get away late in the match before rallying again to get to 24-24, but the Lady Knights tallied the next two points to even the match at a set apiece and let everyone know we were going to be here for a while.

After trailing 8-7 in Set 3, slowly and steadily built a lead throughout the remainder and won it 25-16 on yet another Thornton kill shot.

Set 4 was absolutely insane. Points featured multiple rallies, with all 12 players on the floor making contact on some of them. Crockett notably saved points on two incredible digs, the first by Cole – who got it up in the air just long enough for Forsythe to knock it toward West, who somehow punched it back over the net with a diving effort – and the second by Whitby, who bellyflopped to backhand the ball into the air and set up the point that gave the Lady Cavs a 12-8 advantage.

But despite subsequent kills by Holyfield and Cole, a touch shot winner by Thornton and a literal side-swipe point by the talented sophomore, somehow Chuckey-Doak pulled even yet again at 19-all. A Thornton smash made it 20-19; a Holyfield touch winner kept Crockett ahead 21-20; and a Cole slam on a point in which she touched the ball four different times gave Laman's crew a 24-21 edge.

Addie Davidson – whose serves were as reliable as any Crockett player in this tournament – had the honors for match point, and delivered a perfectly placed offering on which the Lady Knights were eventually called for a lift and a net violation, giving Crockett the match.

At the end of the day, Crockett's six seniors were given the opportunity to express what this team has meant to them. Here are their responses:

Ava Lee – "This season meant the most to me because I knew it was the last time I would be on a team with all of my friends doing what we love. This team is my second family and I can't believe it really is the end. From the sixth grade to now my senior year, volleyball has filled my life with unforgettable memories that I will cherish forever."

Darcy Puffer – "Volleyball is more than just a sport. It's about making lifelong friendships and learning lessons. I want to thank everyone who's helped me through my seven years of hard work and dedication."

Audrey Whitby – "Being on this team has meant so much to me. Volleyball is more than just a sport – it's about the friendships and memories I have made for the past seven years."

Deonna Cole – "I've been playing volleyball since I was in the sixth grade and I never thought that I would love it so much. This season meant the most to me because it's my senior year and my goal was to make it to State with my friends I've had since middle school, and that's exactly what we did. It took a lot of hard work and dedication but we did it and we wouldn't have made it this far without the whole team. I love all my teammates and the amazing last season we had together."

Katherine West – "Being on this team has been the greatest part of high school. It's given me friendships I will hold onto for a lifetime, memories, and taught me how to lead with hard work and heart. Leaving is bittersweet but I will forever be grateful for all the times I had, good or bad."

Keeton Holyfield – "Being on this team has meant the world to me. It has felt as though I had another family. Although it is a sport, it has taught me many life lessons as well as helped me gain more friendships."



Above: District 13-AA Hitter of the Year Wesley Thornton threw a smash party at the TSSAA State Tournament and invited Chuckey-Doak to be the next victims. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Above: Two plays epitomized the effort and determination the Lady Cavaliers used to gain their second win of the week Thursday. On the first, Deonna Cole (on the floor) dove flat out to keep this ball in the air, so that Lakyn Forsythe -- who is falling backwards to avoid Cole -- was able to at least bat the ball sideways, ... (Photo by Ron Barry)



Left: Crockett manager Tink Willis knew this was going to be a fight. She came prepared. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Above: The second standout play came when Audrey Whitby (left) dove on her stomach while backhanding this ball that Wesley Thornton (right) had already managed to keep from hitting the floor, ... (Photo by Ron Barry)

Below: Addie Davidson was one of Crockett's most reliable servers during the State Tournament, including this one on match point against the Lady Knights. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Below: ... thereby allowing Lakyn Forsythe (11) to power-set the ball deep into Chucky-Doak's corner. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Below: Katherine West (3) went high to touch this drop shot just over the outstretched arms of the Churkey-Doak blockers. (Photo by Ron Barry)





Above: Ellie Henderson (12) and Ava Lee (22) offered up a steady two hours of encouragement for their teammates in the grueling duel with Chuckey-Doak. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Left: Keeton Holyfield hammers home a winner, surrounded by helpful teammates Madi Collins (left), Lakyn Forsythe (11), Katherine West, Audrey Whitby, and Wesley Thornton. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Below: Freshmen Lola Bailey (left) and Emilee Chandler got to soak in the State Tournament atmosphere and see what it's like. Both of them will be counted on heavily next season to replace Crockett's senior hitters. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Above: Deonna Cole reaches back to deliver a kill during Crockett's remarkable first-set comeback from an 11-2 deficit. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Below: Audrey Whitby ran down this runaway ball and belted it backwards all the way over the net to keep the point alive for Crockett. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Above: This picture makes it look like Wesley Thornton is going one-against-five vs. the Lady Knights -- which, with her talent, is actually a pretty fair fight. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Above: Coach Andrew Laman used his timeouts judiciously Thursday and kept Chuckey-Doak from gaining too much momentum at any given time. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Left: Deonna Cole checks the scoreboard after her kill shot -- on her fourth touch of the ball in the rally -- gave Crockett a 24-21 lead in the final set, establishing match point. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Below: Lakyn Forsythe -- always working that tongue like Michael Jordan used to -- delivers a fourth-set serve in Crockett's rally to the finish line. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Below: The Lady Cavaliers received a lot of vocal support from some of their faithful JV players. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Above: Madi Collins rips her power serve during the thrilling fourth-set. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Above: Wesley Thornton powers this blast right between the block attempts of two Lady Knight players ... (Photo by Ron Barry)

Right: Wesley Thornton powers this blast right between the block attempts of two Lady Knight players ... (Photo by Ron Barry)



Above: Katherine West slams a winner past a pair of Lady Knights and helps Crockett roll to a third-set victory. (Photo by Ron Barry)

