

RANDALL SMASH IN BOTTOM OF SEVENTH LIFTS

CROCKETT PAST DYER COUNTY 6-5



Above: Aiden Austin just missed turning a double play by a millisecond on this twisting throw to first base in the third inning. (Photo by Ron Barry)

If the key pitch in a baseball game needs to be golfed in order to hit it flush – well, you might as well have a golfer at the plate for your team.

Crockett County has that golfer in the person of sophomore George Randall, who moonlights as the Cavalier third baseman during baseball season. But Monday night in Alamo, Randall had to dip into his golf swing mechanics to deliver the biggest hit of the season for Coach Brad Smith's club.

Batting in the bottom of the seventh inning with the bases loaded and one out in a 5-5 deadlock with district rival Dyer County – currently the state's second-ranked team in the latest TBCA (Tennessee Baseball Coaches Association) AAA poll – Randall said later he was just trying to "stay calm."

"I think everybody was stressed out by that point," Randall said of the back-and-forth battle which Smith described as "a boxing match – body blow after body blow."

Smith had a conversation with Randall before he went to the plate, while Choctaw coaches were having a mound visit to talk their own strategy.

"We talked about the possibility of a squeeze bunt," Randall said. "But not right away. We were going to see where the count went first. I was determined not to let it get that far. I knew I could make contact; I wasn't going to strike out. So when he threw me a change-up that starting breaking down, I just golfed it."

Randall – who plays in the #2 position for Crockett's golf team in the fall season – blasted the low change-up well over the drawn-in left fielder's head, bringing home Carter Winders with the game-winning run in a 6-5 thriller that lived up to the billing of a duel between two of the best teams in Tennessee (Crockett is ranked third in that same TBCA poll).

The two squads will battle again Tuesday night – this time in Newbern – and Smith expects it to be just as much of a boxing match as the first encounter.

"That is a quality baseball program they have over there," Smith said of the Dyer County team. "But you know what? So do we. And they may have a little extra incentive to win now Tuesday night, but I hope they don't want to win any more than we do. We need to be ready from the opening pitch."

Monday's game had all the hallmarks of a classic duel. There were great plays, bad breaks, a couple of debatable calls – you name it. And since Smith labeled it a "boxing match," let's review it that way. ROUND ONE (First Inning): Senior Nash Kilburn was on the mound for Crockett and retired the first two Choctaw hitters on routine fly balls to right fielder Sam Proctor. But then Dyer County's Talon Messer slammed a solo home run to dead center for a 1-0 lead for the visitors. But in the bottom of the first, Cavalier first baseman Brady Fronabarger followed an infield single by leadoff man Callan Willis with a monster shot over the center-field fence, and the hosts had grabbed the advantage back at 2-1.

ROUND TWO (Second Inning): Easton Ozment led off with a scorched double to center and Weston Sims drew a walk to give the Choctaws a pair of baserunners. But on a sacrifice bunt attempt by Clark Ross, the ball popped into the air in foul territory just past the third base line, where the speedy Kilburn dove in full extension to snare it before it hit the ground. After a fielder's choice posted the second out, Kilburn made another outstanding play on a Choctaw bunt, throwing Ty Johnson out from his knees to retire the side.

In the bottom of the frame, Aiden Austin led off with a single and took second on a Randall groundout. After a strikeout and then a walk to Sam Proctor, Willis ripped a single to right to bring Austin home for a 3-1 Crockett edge.

ROUND THREE (Third Inning): Dyer County trimmed the margin by one when Ozment singled Landon Daniels home after his leadoff double. Crockett just missed an inning-ending double play by a millisecond on the previous batter. But the Cavs countered the Choctaw run in the bottom of the stanza when Randall singled home courtesy runner Myles Perkins after walks to Winders and Austin.

ROUND FOUR (Fourth Inning): Neither fighter threw any punches in this round. It was as if they were saving their strength for the final three exchanges. It was at this point, however – at least for a stretch – that the Cavaliers were about to have to endure a run of bad luck.

ROUND FIVE (Fifth Inning): Daniels opened the Dyer County fifth with a base hit to left. After a lineout to Proctor in right field, Messer smoked a hard ground ball right down the third base line that may or may not have been foul when it passed the bag (it was that close). It was ruled fair, went for a double, and Daniels scored to make it 4-3. Carson Nevels then belted a liner into the right-center gap that looked destined for extra bases, but Proctor raced over and made a last-minute stab above his head to catch it for the second out, keeping Messer at second base. Ozment singled to right to put runners on first and third.

Sims then ripped a line drive straight into left field, where Brady Parlow was ready to gun his throw back to the infield on the first hop of the line drive – except that when the ball hit the ground, it took an absurdly high bounce that would have sailed over Goliath's head had he been out there. By the time Parlow could retrieve it at the fence, two runs were in and the Choctaws led 5-4.

"That was the craziest bounce I have ever seen a baseball make since I've been playing," Parlow said later – and he was absolutely right.

In the bottom of the inning, Winders smacked a one-out single, resulting in a Dyer County pitching change. Jacob Wenzler replaced Brock Stanley, but hit Landry Fronabarger with a pitch. Davis Porter was inserted to run for Fronabarger and an Austin groundout advanced both runners. On a 2-2 count to Randall, Winders raced home on a passed ball to tie things up at 5-5, with Porter moving over to third. Randall then drew a walk.

With the go-ahead run now at third and Randall at first, Karson Kail was called upon to pinch-hit. On a 1-1 count, Randall took off for second base as Kail swung to protect him. Choctaw catcher Nevels received the pitch and then threw weakly back to his pitcher – prompting the home plate umpire to rule that Kail had somehow interfered with a throw to catch Randall stealing, even though Nevels clearly had no intention of trying to throw to second base. The call ended the Crockett threat, and it was still 5-5.

ROUND SIX: Willis came on in relief of Kilburn for Crockett and issued a one-out walk to Johnson, who stole second after a popout to third baseman Randall. On a 2-2 count, he also tried to steal third, but Winders' throw to Randall beat him by a body length. Score a knockdown punch for the Cavs, whose fortunes were beginning to turn – even though they didn't threaten in the bottom of the frame.

ROUND SEVEN: Willis walked the leadoff man, but Kilburn – now playing center – chased down a long fly ball from Messer for the first out. Willis then fanned Nevels, but Ozment reached on an infield error. Willis shook it off and got Sims to pop out to first, and Crockett would now have a chance to win it in the bottom of the inning.

Brady Fronabarger took a mighty swing at Wenzler's first pitch – and dribbled it just far enough toward third base to easily beat it out for a hit. With Fronabarger running on a 1-1 pitch to Winders, the senior catcher popped it to second baseman Seth Headtkke, who – possibly in the anticipation of doubling Fronabarger up – somehow didn't catch the pop fly. The Choctaws settled for the forceout at second – since Fronabarger had hustled back toward first – and the first out had been recorded.

It was Crockett's turn for a break, and it happened when Landry Fronabarger hit a sharp one-hopper right back at pitcher Wenzler, a tailor-made double-play ball. But Wenzler overthrew his middle infielders, and both runners were safe. Dyer County then intentionally walked the lefty-hitting Austin to get to the righthanded Randall against the righty Wenzler.

While the Choctaws huddled with Coach Preston Ozment on the mound, Smith strolled down from his coaching area to talk with Randall. But after you've stared down a mid-range putt on the final hole to qualify for a Region Tournament, Randall was unfazed.

And on the very first pitch of the at-bat, Randall blistered that change-up as hard as any ball he's hit this year, driving it well over Daniels' head in left field while the Cavalier bench emptied onto the field in joyous celebration, gaining a key district win (they're now 3-0) and securing their eleventh consecutive victory in a 14-2 season. Knockout! The winners will try to retain the championship belt in the rematch Tuesday.



Above: Brady Fronabarger launched this ball into orbit out beyond the center-field fence, giving Crockett a 2-1 lead in the bottom of the first. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Above: George Randall follows through on his big bases-loaded smash in the bottom of the seventh to deal the knockout blow to the Dyer County Choctaws Monday night ... (Photo by Ron Barry)

Below: ... igniting a wild celebration that started with Brady Fronabarger (7) and Aiden Austin (12) and carried from the second base area out into left field. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Below: Cav pitcher Nash Kilburn prevented a potential Dyer County rally in the second by making this diving catch of a popped-up bunt in foul territory, ... (Photo by Ron Barry)



Above: ... landing flat on his stomach to complete the hustling grab after sprinting off the mound. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Below: Nash Kilburn got some bad breaks with crazy bounces and barely-fair hits, but kept Crockett close through five tough innings against the talented Choctaws. (Photo by Ron Barry)





Above: Brady Fronabarger's home run was the first of two hits he had in the game ... (Photo by Ron Barry)

Below: ... as he later beat out this infield dribbler to give the Cavs the lead baserunner in the decisive seventh inning. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Right: But it all came down to the bottom of the seventh, when Dyer County intentionally walked Aiden Austin to load the bases and set up a righty-righty matchup with George Randall, who spoke with Coach Brad Smith prior to the at-bat. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Left: Callan Willis came on in relief for the final two innings, shutting the Choctaws out ... (Photo by Ron Barry)

Below: ... and benefitting from the strong arm of catcher Carter Winders, who gunned down the potential go-ahead run on a steal attempt of third in the sixth inning. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Below: George Randall "golfed" the first pitch he saw -- a change-up -- and ripped it toward left field, ... (Photo by Ron Barry)





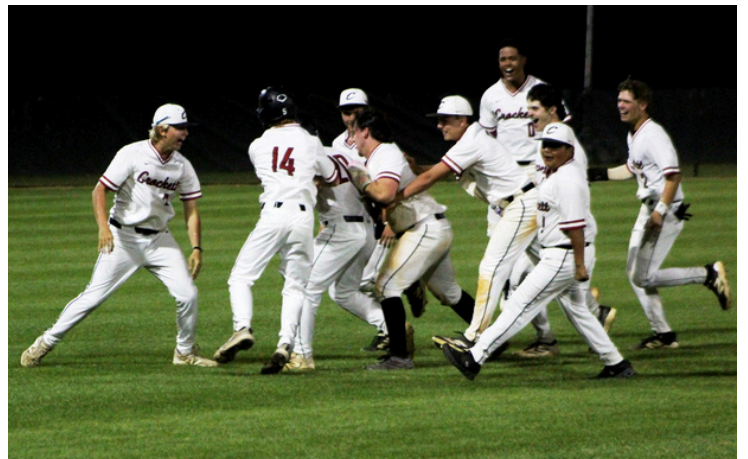
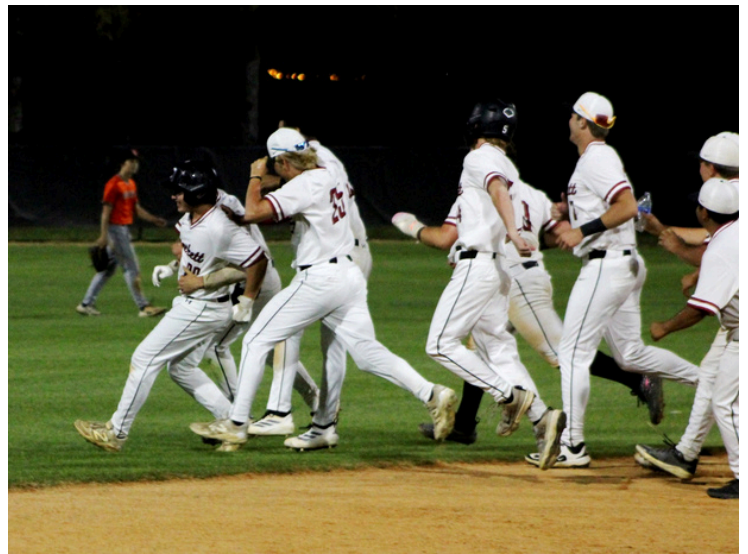
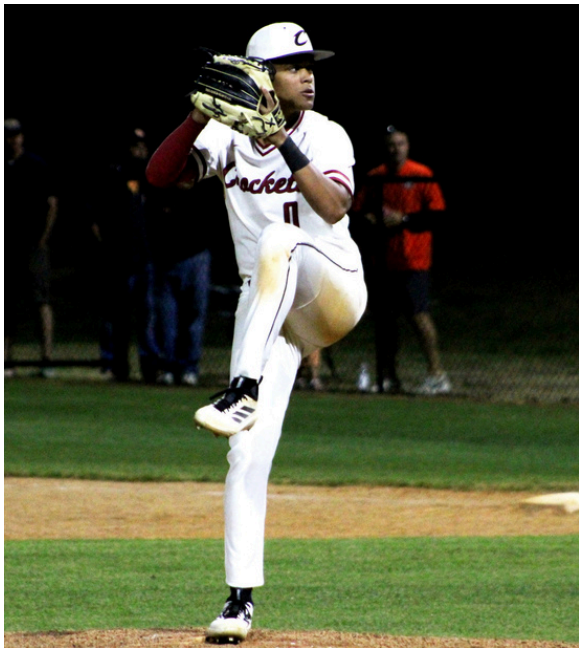
Above: ... and watched it soar well over left fielder Landon Daniels' head for the game-winning knockout punch. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Left: The celebration began near second base, with water spraying, bear hugs, and the traditional physical abuse, ... (Photo by Ron Barry)

Below: ... and eventually spread into left field, where Randall was mobbed repeatedly by an excited group of Cavaliers, ... (Photo by Ron Barry)

Below: Callan Willis picked up the win in relief, his first hurling triumph of the season. He also had two hits, scored a run, and drove one in. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Above: ... who had just won their eleventh consecutive game, this time over the state's second-ranked Class AAA team. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Left: Now the Cavs -- who are ranked #3 themselves -- will try to repeat the magic Tuesday night in Newbern when they face the Choctaws again. (Photo by Ron Barry)

