INCREDIBLE FINISH BRINGS CROCKETT GIRLS THEIR FIRST WEST SECTIONAL TRACK CHAMPIONSHIP



Above: The West Sectional champions (missing Julia Finley and Alivia Hale) -- they'll be heading for Knoxville after CCHS holds its graduation next Friday. (Photo by Ron Barry)

The starter's gun is up. An annoying light rain is falling. The dripping, overcast sky has been tormenting runners, coaches, and spectators all afternoon.

It's time for the final girls race of the day at the TSSAA Division I Class AA Track & Field West Sectional at Lakeland Preparatory School just outside of Memphis. It's the one meet – along with the separately-held Pentathlon event, which occurred on April 15 – that determines who goes to the State Championships in Knoxville.

By the time most track meets reach this stage – the last race, the 4x400-meter relay – the overall team outcome has long been decided. Some school has run away (pun intended) from the others as a clear winner, and it's just waiting to pick up its medals and go home.

Ah, but that would have been way too easy on this difficult, nerve-twisting rainy day.

The 4x400 means one full lap around the track for each of the four team members. Running a 400 is often said to be the most demanding and/or strategic race in track & field, because it's not definitively a distance race and it's not specifically a sprint. It's BOTH: you have to sprint for a distance longer than your legs want to go full speed.

And in a relay, you have the added pressure of not dropping the baton during the exchanges. While not an automatic disqualification, it CAN be if you interfere with other runners during the retrieval or the baton gets outside of the exchange zone. Or if it's picked up by the runner who didn't drop it. Oh – did we mention it's been raining all day all over this slick piece of metal?

The top two teams in the West Sectional are awarded attractive plaques by the TSSAA. Crockett County has never had one in track & field. The Lady Cavaliers have a chance at one right now.

Their coaches – Head Coach Julie Nass and Assistants Charles Evans and Walker Williams – have been very busy all afternoon spitting numbers and possibilities through their brains while the sky has been steadily spitting on their noggins as well. Nass and Williams have been trying to compute all the various possible point outcomes; Evans has been concentrating on keeping the athletes prepared and informed about their races and strategies.

In track & field, every event is scored on a declining point basis, with eight participants rewarded on the following scale: 10 for first, 8 for second, 6 for third, and then 5-4-3-2-1 for spots fourth through eighth.

As the final event is called to the starting line, host school Lakeland Prep has 95 points. Crockett has 91. Raleigh Egypt has 90. Yes, it's been that kind of a day. The lead has taken more turns than a Formula One Grand Prix layout and has changed hands more than the best gift at a "Dirty Santa" party. And it's boiling down to THIS race.

There is one bit of good news for the Lady Cavaliers: Lakeland Prep does not have a team in this event. The Lady Lions can't add to their point total, so 95 is their lot.
But, that means Crockett needs at least five points – no worse than a fourth-place finish – to pass Lakeland. But there's a second "but": Raleigh Egypt has a team in the race. If Crockett beats the Pharaohs, Nass and company will have their first Sectional plaque. If the Pharaohs defeat the Lady Cavs, the loss of the plaque will feel more like a biblical plague.

At the start line for Crockett is freshman Marley Thornton, and this will certainly be the biggest race of her young life. She'll be handing the baton off to another freshman, Caroline Scruggs. Two rookies. If their nerves are off the charts, it's understandable.

Avery Thornton will run the third leg. She'll either still be high on the adrenaline rush of qualifying for the State earlier in the day in the 800-meter run – or her legs will be spent from the personal record time of 2:34.15 in which she ran it.

The anchor will be senior Claire Evans, who also scored points in that same 800 as well as the earlier 400. It will be her third run of the day, but she'd told Nass she was up for it.

All four Crockett girls are members of the school's cross-country team. Distance runners, not sprinters. Now needing to sprint a distance. In the rain. With the pressure of a sumo wrestler sitting on a full balloon.

The starter's gun sounds, and Raleigh Egypt's leadoff runner looks like she's just been shot out of a cannon. She ran the first half of her lap as an all-out 200 and opened up an early gap over the more reasonable runners. Marley Thornton – to her credit –didn't take the bait and burn herself out, opting for a steady pace that kept the Lady Pharaoh leader within catching distance as her teammates followed.

Raleigh Egypt's second runner didn't sprint all out as the first one had, and Scruggs – who'd already scored a point with a surprisingly effective run in the 1600 earlier – shaved about half the margin away during her split.

When Avery Thornton – Marley's older sister – took the baton, she quickly answered the question: adrenaline or spent? Adrenaline was the response, and the cagey junior made a significant deficit reduction while Bolton's quartet actually took the lead in the race. Entering the final lap, it was Bolton in front, Raleigh Egypt in second, and Crockett in third. If it stayed that way, the Lady Pharaohs eight points would swing them ahead of a Lady Cav third-place finish by a single point overall.

For three-fourths of the final lap, Evans was steady but losing a little bit of ground to the sprinting Raleigh Egypt anchor. But as they reached the last 80 meters – with Evans about 20-25 meters behind – Crockett's senior dug deep and told her deadening legs to find another gear.

"I wasn't happy with the way my first two races went Wednesday," she said later. "I'm not sure where I found the extra kick, but I was determined not to finish behind Raleigh Egypt. This one was for the cross-country runners!"

As they galloped down the stretch, the gap went from 20 meters to 15 to 10 – but there were only 30 to go. It looked impossible. And then…

The only way to describe the finish is to say that Evans looked like a Ferrari and the Lady Pharaoh looked like an AMC Pacer or a Ford Pinto that had blown a tire. Evans kept straining and straining and straining some more until she caught her nemesis with less than first-down yardage to go and then blazed past her quickly enough to beat her by more than a second.

And with it, the relay team had qualified for State with a second-place finish, and the entire team claimed first place in the West Sectional standings.

"I don't have the words to tell you what this means for our program without starting to cry," an emotional Nass said after the miracle finish. "Every single girl contributed to this win in one way or another. We kept telling the girls to do the best you can; if you can't win, get the best placement you can still get, because every point counts in a meet like this. And now they may see – at least once – that we were right!"

Her laugh betrayed any thought that this team doesn't listen.

The day actually turned for Crockett in the 800-meter run when Avery Thornton finished second, freshman Ruth Gourley a close third, and Evans a credible sixth, providing 17 huge points to the Lady Cav total in a single race. Alivia Hale scored points in both the 1600 and 3200 and Addie Davidson chipped in a fourth-place finish in the 300-meter hurdles, setting yet another school record.

On the boys side of things, a clear highlight was the 1600 run of senior Aidan Klonowski, who finally kicked the injury bug that has plagued him repeatedly in past seasons. Facing heavy race favorite Jonathan Lewis of South Gibson, Klonowski attached himself to Lewis' shoulder from the very start and simply stayed there, matching the Hornet star stride-for-stride and finishing less than three seconds behind him to claim second place in 4:38.22, a full 11 seconds better than his previous best and only two-hundredths of a second off the school record. The run earned him a slot in the State in Knoxville.

Titus Luten took third in the 110-meter hurdles and Klonowski anchored the boys 4x400 relay team to another third-place finish in a race in which third-leg runner Christian Buchannan made a significant charge to improve the team's position.

The State meet begins mid-month in Knoxville. The win by Crockett's girls is made more notable by the fact that there are only three sectionals in track & field – West, Middle, and East – while there are eight in most of the other TSSAA sports. The Lady Cavaliers established themselves as the best Class AA team west of the Tennessee River, which is the area covered by the sectional.

The top five finishers in each of Wednesday's events, and any other Crockett athletes who placed…

Girls 3200m Run: (1) Bella Lamb, Chester Co 12:10.50; (2) Corrie Mihalko, Millington 12:44.57; (3) Claire Coleman, Chester Co 13:04.12; (4) Lauren Carpenter, Hardin Co 13:11.64; (5) Bailey Haliburton, Dyer Co 13:20.31; (6) Alivia Hale, Crockett 13:22.45.
Girls 100m Hurdles: (1) Leah Gregory, Memphis East 15.39; (2) Jomeria Tate, Raleigh Egypt 15.64; (3) Jasmine Kilpatrick, Raleigh Egypt 16.45; (4) Holland Johnson, South Gibson 17.11; (5) Jayda Graves, Ripley 18.21.
Boys 110m Hurdles: (1) Ja'Ceon Blake, Raleigh Egypt 15.45; (2) Johnathan Currie, Ripley 15.94; (3) Titus Luten, Crockett 16.53; (4) Willie Green, Millington 16.95; (5) Rickey Olvera, South Gibson 18.09.
Girls 100m Run: (1) Kelsey Phillips, Lakeland Prep 12.38; (2) Sa-Mia Collier, Bolton 12.58; (3) Aydison Dilworth, Jackson South Side 12.96; (4) Lana Landry, Dyer Co 12.96; (5) Isabella Reynolds, Brighton 13.10.
Boys 100m Run: (1) Rodney Gude, Millington 10.83; (2) Jaden McKinney, Power Center Academy 10.96; (3) Charles Brown, Millington 11.06; (4) Amarion Arnold, Lexington 11.20; (5) Keenan Banks, Raleigh Egypt 11.25.
Girls 4x200m Relay: (1) Lakeland Prep 1:48.42; (2) Bolton 1:50.86; (3) Ripley 1:51.79; (4) Raleigh Egypt 1:53.51; (5) Haywood 1:56.13; (Crockett [Zinayah Donald, Zamaria Edwards, Cesia Sanchez, Catherine Scruggs, and Gabby Yarberry as an injury fill-in] 2:07.64.

Boys 4x200m Relay: (1) Millington 1:29.65; (2) Raleigh Egypt 1:33.99; (3) Haywood 1:34.10; (4) Jackson South Side 1:34.40; (5) Lakeland Prep 1:34.51.

Girls 1600m Run: (1) Kate Ashby, Memphis East 5:50.48; (2) Corrie Mihalko, Millington 6:06.51; (3) Mya Hunt, Kirby 6:14.41; (4) Elaine Fabacher, Lakeland Prep 6:15.39; (5) Eva Lewis, Lexington 6:18.11; (6) Alivia Hale, Crockett 6:22.03; (Caroline Scruggs, Crockett 6:33.86.

Boys 1600m Run: (1) Jonathan Lewis, South Gibson 4:35.51; (2) Aidan Klonowski, Crockett 4:38.22 [PR]; (3) Tayshun Bowers, Dyer Co 4:45.77; (4) Brock Baskin, Brighton 4:52.01; (5) Melvin Macklin, Memphis East 4:52.61.

Girls 4x100m Relay: (1) Lakeland Prep 52.22; (2) Bolton 52.34; (3) Lexington 53.84; (4) Dyer County 54.31; (5) Ripley 54.34.

Boys 4x100m Relay: (1) Lexington 44.63; (2) South Gibson 44.74; (3) Haywood 44.85; (4) Dyer County 45.35; (5) Fayette Ware 45.79.

Girls 400m Run: (1) Sa-Mia Collier, Bolton 1:01.22; (2) Chloe Flowers, Bolton 1:03.71; (3) Amear'ra Cook, Jackson South Side 1:04.91; (4) Addison Beth Johnson, Lakeland Prep 1:04.92; (5) Cayla McIntire, Lakeland Prep 1:06.20; (6) Claire Evans, Crockett 1:07.17.

Boys 400m Run: (1) Charles Brown, Millington 48.78; (2) Rodney Gude, Millington 49.36; (3) Reginald Alls, Kirby 50.20; (4) Orion Blackmon, Millington 50.96; (5) Brendan Winbush, Brighton 52.46.

Girls 300m Hurdles: (1) Leah Gregory, Memphis East 46.53; (2) Jasmine Kilpatrick, Raleigh Egypt 46.99; (3) Honesty Jones, Memphis East 49.10; (4) Addie Davidson, Crockett 52.10 [PR; new CCHS school record]; (5) Kaitlyn Smoot, Haywood 56.43.

Boys 300m Hurdles: (1) Willie Green, Millington 43.81; (2) Makel Noel, Ridgeway 44.09; (3) Isaiah Bingham, Hardin Co 44.50; (4) Alonzo Green, Dyersburg 44.87; (5) Martez Washington, Jackson North Side 47.22; (Aaron Morgan, Crockett 48.31.

Girls 800m Run: (1) Kate Ashby, Memphis East 2:30.74; (2) Avery Thornton, Crockett 2:34.15; (3) Ruth Gourley, Crockett 2:39.13; (4) Amira Boatman, Memphis East 2:40.92; (5) Makayla Isaac, Kirby 2:40.99; (6) Claire Evans, Crockett 2:55.68.

Boys 800m Run: (1) Kam Lloyd, Millington 2:03.31; (2) Melvin Macklin, Memphis East 2:05.77; (3) Titus Postler, Millington 2:08.25; (4) Ayden Perkins, Millington 2:08.61; (5) Brock Baskin, Brighton 2:10.08.

Girls 200m Run: (1) Kelsey Phillips, Lakeland Prep 25.64; (2) Sa-Mia Collier, Bolton 26.10; (3) Aydison Dilworth, Jackson South Side 26.81; (4) Dallas Talley, Chester Co 27.18; (5) Isabella Reynolds, Brighton 27.34.

Boys 200m Run: (1) Charles Brown, Millington 22.19; (2) Jaden McKinney, Power Center Academy 22.25; (3) Rodney Gude, Millington 22.37; (4) Courtney Phillips, Lakeland Prep 22.64; (5) Landon Browder, Hardin Co 22.92.

Boys 3200m Run: (1) Jonathan Lewis, South Gibson 9:54.80; (2) Silas McManus, Chester Co 10:05.62; (3) Reese Harber, Dyer Co 11:16.16; (4) Preston Sparks, Chester Co 12:06.74; (5) Ian Dycus, Fayette Ware 12:44.92.

Girls 4x400m Relay: (1) Bolton 4:33.18; (2) Crockett [Marley Thornton, Caroline Scruggs, Avery Thornton, Claire Evans] 4:34.39; (3) Raleigh Egypt 4:36.02; (4) Craigmont 5:05.92; (5) Melrose 5:11.15.

Boys 4x400m Relay: (1) Millington 3:33.49; (2) Covington 3:40.83; (3) Crockett [Khilan Thomas, Cortland Reddick, Christian Buchannan, Aidan Klonowski] 3:45.80; (4) Haywood 3:48.89; (5) Memphis East 3:49.43.

Girls Team Scores [Final]: (1) Crockett County 99; (2) Raleigh Egypt 96; (3) Lakeland Prep 95; (4) Bolton 85; (5) Memphis East 79; (6) Chester Co 38; (7) Dyer Co 37.50; (Ripley 22.50; (T-9) South Gibson and Haywood 21; (11) Jackson South Side 19.50; (T-12) Millington and Lexington 16; (14) Fayette Ware 14; (15) Melrose 11.50; (16) Kirby 11; (17) Hardin Co 9; (18) Brighton 8; (19) Covington 6; (20) Craigmont 5; (21) Hamilton 3; (22) Jackson North Side 2; (23) McNairy Central 1.

Boys Team Scores [Final]: (1) Millington 149; (2) South Gibson 73; (T-3) Raleigh Egypt and Lakeland Prep 63; (5) Memphis East 54; (6) Brighton 38; (7) Dyer Co 35; (Haywood 30; (9) Lexington 29; (10) Covington 27; (11) Crockett County 22; (12) Dyersburg 19; (T-13) Power Center Academy and Jackson North Side 16; (T-15) Ripley, Hardin Co, Fayette Ware, and Chester Co 13; (T-19) Ridgeway and Kirby 12; (21) Jackson South Side 7; (22) Melrose 2; (23) Craigmont 1.



Left: At this point, it looks impossible for Claire Evans (right) to catch Raleigh Egypt's runner -- who already appears to be celebrating -- with so little to go in the 4x400 relay race. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Below: But Evans digs deep, finds another gear, and draws nearly even as Bolton's team crosses the finish line as the race winner. (Photo by Ron Barry)





Above: The real race is for second place, however, because it will determine the West Sectional team championship -- and with just a few yards left, Raleigh Egypt and Crockett are neck-and-neck. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Right: With just five meters to go, Claire Evans makes the pass as the Lady Pharaoh lunges for the finish line too soon, surprised by Evans' presence. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Right: As Evans crosses the finish line, she's now decidedly ahead, and the Lady Cavaliers clinch the West Sectional team championship for the first time in history. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Left: The 4x400 relay team that pulled off the miracle (left to right): junior Avery Thornton, senior Claire Evans, freshman Marley Thornton, and freshman Caroline Scruggs. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Left: Aidan Klonowski claimed a State Meet berth in the boys 1600 by sticking with race favorite Jonathan Lewis of South Gibson and never letting him run away. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Right: Klonowski stayed within a few yards of Lewis all the way to the finish line to shave 11 seconds off his previous best time in the 1600. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Below: The tight scoring race in the girls competition began to turn Crockett's way when the three Lady Cavs in the middle here -- Ruth Gourley, Avery Thornton, and Claire Evans -- lined up to begin the 800-meter run. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Right: Crockett's Titus Luten engineered a third-place finish in the 110-meter hurdles, which gives him an outside chance at gaining an at-large berth in the State race. (Photo by Ron Barry)





Above: Freshman Ruth Gourley (left) finished third; Avery Thornton (middle) second -- earning a berth in the State 800 -- and Claire Evans was sixth, providing Crockett a hefty 17 team points from one race alone. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Below: Addie Davidson sails over the final hurdle on her way to a fourth-place finish in the 300-meter hurdles. (Photo by Ron Barry)





Above: Here are Crockett's State Meet qualifiers, minus Alivia Hale, who will run in the 4x800 relay: (from left) Caroline Scruggs -- relays; Claire Evans -- relays; Avery Thornton -- relays and 800; Aidan Klonowski -- 1600; Addie Davidson --pole vault and pentathlon; Ruth Gourley -- relays; Marley Thornton -- relays; and Catherine Scruggs -- relays alternate if needed. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Below: An overjoyed Avery Thornton is looking for Coach Julie Nass, ready for a big celebration hug. Thornton has qualified for three events at the State Meet in Knoxville. (Photo by Ron Barry)





Above: Cesia Sanchez awaits a teammate's handoff in the 4x200 relay. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Right: Before the start of the day's final race -- the decisive relay -- freshman Marley Thornton is alone with her thoughts, ready for the starter's gun. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Left: Caroline Scruggs ran a key second leg in the decisive 4x400 relay, trimming the Raleigh Egypt lead. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Below: Aaron Morgan picked up a team point for the Crockett boys with an eighth-place finish in the 300-meter hurdles. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Left: Alivia Hale (center) earned points in two distance races -- splashing through the rain -- and qualified for the State Meet in the 4x800 relay. (Photo by Ron Barry)

