CROCKETT WINS REGION 7-AAA BASEBALL CHAMPIONSHIP IN UNBELIEVABLE FASHION



Above: Carter Winders watches his eighth-inning walkoff home run sail over the left field fence to win the Region 7-AAA Baseball Championship for Crockett County ... (Photo by Ron Barry)

There are no adequate existing words in the English language to describe what happened Saturday afternoon in the TSSAA Region 7-AAA Baseball Tournament championship game. Some new ones will have to suffice.

On the strength of two titanic home runs, Crockett County edged Dyer County 5-4 in extra innings in Henderson in one of the most nerve-wracking – for both teams – athletic contests in high school history.

The first one was "Nashed" (not "mashed," although it WAS). The second one was "Cartered" (not "catered," although it served up perhaps the tastiest dish Cavalier fans have swallowed in a long time).

Dyer County had erased a 1-0 Cavalier lead with a four-run rally in the top of the fifth inning, keyed by Talon Messer's three-run homer to left. The momentum appeared to have swung completely in the Choctaws' favor.

But in the bottom of the frame – displaying yet again the resilience this team has shown all season – Sam Proctor got hit by a pitch and stole second; Callan Willis worked a full-count walk; and Nash Kilburn – described by teammate Cole Summar as "the clutchiest player I've ever seen" – hammered a three-run blast through a steady breeze and over the right-field fence, tying the game at 4-4 and swinging the momentum back to the Crockett side... momentarily.

"Momentarily" is the appropriate word because, for the rest of regulation play, the momentum seemed to switch sides on almost every pitch.

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In the top of the sixth inning, Cav reliever George Randall wriggled out of a bases-loaded jam to keep the score deadlocked. In the bottom of the sixth, Crockett saw its potential go-ahead run thrown out at second on a base-stealing attempt.

In the top of the seventh, against new Cav reliever Brady Fronabarger, the Choctaws got a leadoff double from Carson Nevels. Pinch-runner Ty Johnson moved to third on a swinging-bunt single by Weston Sims before Fronabarger posted a strikeout for a big first out. But Sims then stole second, and Landon Daniels rifled an absolute bullet to the middle that – in a normal game – would likely have been a two-run single for a 6-4 Dyer County lead. Instead, the ball drilled Fronabarger directly on his right heel and miraculously froze right in front of him, allowing him to throw to first for the second out without either Choctaw runner advancing.

The next man grounded to Crockett second baseman Aiden Austin, who threw him out at first. It was the second straight inning Austin had to make the pressure-packed third-out throw while Dyer County had the potential winning run ready to score.



Above: ... and then enthusiastically hops around the bases with the conclusion to one of the greatest battles in high school tournament history. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Things looked rosier for Crockett when Proctor – who was on base all three times he batted – led off the bottom of the seventh by steering a double down the right-field line. Following a strikeout, Kilburn drew a walk to put Cavs on first and second with Fronabarger coming up. He barreled a 2-0 pitch on the ground, but shortstop Messer was perfectly positioned and turned a double play to send the duel into extra innings.

Messer led off the Choctaw eighth with a lined single to left and power-hitting Jake Stanley drew a walk. When Seth Headtke's bouncy infielder grounder found just the right spot where no one could throw him out, Dyer County had the bases loaded again – this time, with nobody out.

Easton Ozment then drove a liner to right, where the strong-armed Kilburn caught it and immediately delivered a one-hop strike to catcher Carter Winders right on the money – holding all the runners on their respective sacks, and now with one out. Johnson, who had entered as a pinch runner for the designated hitter earlier, couldn't get a bunt down on the first pitch, and eventually Fronabarger got the strikeout he needed for out number two.

Then – for the third straight time – Austin fielded a grounder and made the pressure-packed throw to first for the third out. Crockett had escaped again.

Winders would lead off the bottom of the eighth for the Cavs. In a previous at-bat, in the bottom of the fifth, the Choctaws intentionally walked him even though no one was on base. But this time, they elected to pitch to him.

Ozment, who came on in relief of Headtke to begin the seventh, was the pitcher. Ironically, he will be Winders' roommate when the two move on to Walters State Community College in the fall.

After two pitches outside the zone, Winders fouled off the next toss. The count was now 2-and-1.

"I was just trying to be ready for anything when I first went up to bat," Winders said, "but when the count got to 2-and-1, I knew Easton has a really good curve ball, and I figured he'd try to throw it then. But he hung it, and I was able to put a good swing on it."

As the ball cleared the left-field fence – despite a valiant defensive effort by left-fielder Nathan Vick, who actually flipped over the railing trying to make the catch – Crockett's crowd exploded with a joyous roar as Winders hopped around the base path, screaming and yelling himself most of the way.
A very emotional Smith – who has now coached Crockett to an incredible 33-3 record thus far – was ecstatic that Winders got this chance to shine on a big stage.

"People need to realize something about this kid," Smith said. "He's special. He's a dog. I texted him last night after watching Friday's second game to tell him whom we'd be playing and that he'd have the ball (as starting pitcher). He 'liked' the text, and then sent one back that said, 'Let's go win a region championship!' That's what big dogs do. And you know what? He's not the only big dog we have. There are several like that."
One is Kilburn, who doubled home Crockett's first run in the third before "Nashing" his three-run homer in the fifth to bring the Cavs back from the edge of defeat.

Another is Proctor, who was 2-for-2 with a pair of stolen bases and a hit-by-pitch, and caught Winders for the first five innings before moving to left field. Together, he and Winders were cruising along with a shutout until Winders was active running the bases in the fourth inning. He had reached on an error and then took a hard, awkward slide into second while stealing, and it may have factored into the Choctaw rally in the top of the fifth.

But when he "Cartered" that ball in the eighth, Crockett had its championship.

The Cavs now move on to a West Sectional, where they will play a best-of-three series against Lakeland Prep. TSSAA has mandated the series must be held within the time frame of May 13-16. Crockett will host the series and will be the home team on the scoreboard for Game 1 and Game 3 (if necessary).



Above: Nash Kilburn had given the Cavs a 1-0 lead with this RBI double in the third inning. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Left: Dyer County's Talon Messer erased Crockett's advantage with a three-run homer in the fifth inning, keying a four-run rally that put the Choctaws on top. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Right: But Nash Kilburn brought Crockett right back when he "Nashed" his own three-run jack, celebrating at home plate with Brady Fronabarger, Sam Proctor, Carter Winders, and Callan Willis. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Below: Brady Fronabarger came on to pitch the seventh, and the Cavs got a massive break when a ball belted up the middle hit Fronabarger in the right heel and just died in front of him, allowing him to throw out the batter and freezing the go-ahead run at third. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Above: George Randall pitched the sixth inning in relief and wriggled out of a bases-loaded jam to keep the game tied 4-4. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Below: Sam Proctor thought he had set up Crockett to win in the bottom of the seventh with this leadoff double, but he ended up stranded by an inning-ending double play. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Below: Brady Fronabarger then worked out of a bases-loaded, no-outs predicament in the eighth inning, ... (Photo by Ron Barry)







Above: ... with the final out thrown to first by Aiden Austin, who -- while he didn't have his best day at the plate -- made three consecutive inning-ending plays at second base to bail the Cavs out of trouble. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Below; Shortstop Mason Ray watches the proceedings after he and his teammates clinched the region title and are now just two more victories away from a State Tournament berth. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Right: Sitting in Coach Brad Smith's chair at the end of it all was this testament to Crockett's season-long resilience and 33-3 record. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Below: That set the stage for Carter Winders, who "Cartered" this blast over the left-field fence to win the game and send Crockett into a host role in the West Sectional. (Photo by Ron Barry)





Left: Carter Winders was so hyped after his game-winning homer that he fired off his batting gloves and stomped around for a while. Coach Brad Smith said his competitiveness is part of what makes him a "dog." (Photo by Ron Barry)

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