TSSAA CLASS-AAA STATE BASEBALL CHAMPIONS! CAVS EARN FIRST STATE TITLE



Above: Finished Business. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Carter Winders couldn't sleep.

It was Thursday night at the Holiday Inn Express in Smyrna, Tennessee, and Crockett County's newly-honored "Mr. Baseball" had just caught both emotionally-draining games of a State Tournament doubleheader – and the second game had even gone an extra inning. If ever a human body could easily crash on the nearest bed and pillow, surely this was that time.
But Winders couldn't sleep. Neither, as it turns out, could his fellow senior class teammates.

Their business was not finished.

There was only one more game to be played in TSSAA Class-AAA baseball in 2026: the State Championship Game. One of the participants would be Greeneville High School, the defending state champion. They fully expected to be there. The Greene Devils (as they are called) are… well, let's just say they are an extremely self-assured group of young men.

In the other dugout would be Winders and his Crockett County Cavaliers. If you thought at the start of this season they'd be playing in this final game, you'd be lying.

But here they were.

And this group of seniors – these guys who had been through four coaches in three years – couldn't sleep.

They were preparing to finish their business.

"We couldn't sleep," Winders said. "We weren't really nervous or anything like that. We were just ready to play. We started talking together about Greeneville, about how we didn't like the fact that they'd been ranked above us all year long when we think we have a better team than they do. So we were just kind of psyching ourselves up."

The game was originally scheduled to be played on Friday afternoon at Middle Tennessee State University's field, but TSSAA officials moved it to Siegel High School (where the infield, mound, and batter's box are all artificially turfed) and changed the start time to 11 a.m. in an attempt to beat the weather.

No offense to those officials, but the weather had been beating them to a pulp all week long. And it won the early rounds in this match as well.

Crockett would be the visiting team, and Coach Brad Smith's Cavs immediately sent a message that they weren't intimidated to be here. Leadoff man Callan Willis belted a line drive to right field that was caught with a shoestring dive by Greeneville's Tegan Begley. Crockett's Nash Kilburn then smoked a screamer right at first baseman Will Harmon, who snared it for the second out.

Two swings, two bullets. Nothing to show for it yet, but the confidence was growing, and Greeneville's Grayson Crosby had to know he was fortunate to have two outs and no baserunners – but he hadn't fooled anybody yet.

He didn't fool the Cavs' third-hole hitter Brady Fronabarger either. Fronabarger ripped a hard ground ball straight up the middle for a single, and one thing was beginning to get even clearer: Crockett was here to finish its business.

Winders was next up, and on an 0-and-2 count, took one to the helmet that could have seriously altered the Cavs' destiny had it been just inches over. And if the unable-to-sleep Winders needed a wake-up call, Crosby had just accidentally delivered one.

The Cavs didn't score in the first, and neither did the Devils, as Winders sent his own message by striking out the leadoff man. Crockett was scoreless in the second as well, and as Greeneville came to bat in the bottom of the frame, it began to softly rain.

A one-out infield single by Crosby gave the Devils their first baserunner, and he was in motion to avoid the double play when an ensuing grounder to shortstop Mason Ray went for a force at first base. Two outs, new courtesy runner Siler Lewis on second. The rain began falling harder, and it was reaching unplayable stage when a ground ball was booted in the Cav infield and Lewis came around to score the game's first run as the bottom fell out of the sky.

Greeneville 1, Crockett 0. Weather 4, TSSAA 0 – it was raining for the fourth straight day.

Play was suspended after the run scored. Greeneville had the momentum and its fans were rightly enthused about it. But now everybody had four hours to kill, with no guarantee things would likely be better at 4 p.m.

"When it started raining hard, at first I got mad," Winders said. "Here we were, ready to play, and now we had to deal with yet another rain delay. This was getting old.

"But during the break, I decided to think about it differently," he said. "I started asking, 'What if this is a good thing?' They were building a little momentum, and the rain at least interrupted that. Then I started thinking, 'What if this is a God thing?' Like I was supposed to use this situation and this delay to just make a reset. So that's what I did. I decided to look at it as a positive thing rather than a negative thing, and let's just use it as a fresh start if we picked back up."

Miraculously, play was resumed at 4:00, under threatening skies – but no rain for the moment. And with Greeneville at bat with two outs, Crockett catcher Sam Proctor promptly threw out the Devil baserunner who attempted to steal second base. The positive reset had been immediately affirmed.

Although the Cavs left two men aboard in the third, Winders struck out two Devil batters in the bottom of the frame. Greeneville hitters began openly complaining to the plate umpire about nearly every strike call, and it wasn't helping their cause.

It should be noted that while this umpire had a high strike zone in relation to most others, he established it early and was consistent with it throughout the game. Greeneville pitcher Crosby was certainly using it as often as Winders was, and every batter in the contest should have been aware to make the adjustment.

Crockett was adjusting by the top of the fourth. Junior second sacker Aiden Austin ripped a hard single to right to lead things off, although he was erased on a double play ball – also hit hard. Ray then smacked another hard grounder that was booted by the third baseman, and Proctor followed with a scorched liner down the left-field line that rolled all the way to the fence and allowed a hustling Ray to beat a high relay throw to the plate, tying the game at 1-1.

Winders struck out the first two Devil hitters in the bottom of the fourth and then left fielder Brody Parlow – who made several nice defensive plays, battling a brisk wind blowing straight out that way – snared a deep fly ball. Four innings down, 1-1 score.

With one out in the Cav fifth – Kilburn had again crushed another liner right at first baseman Harmon – Fronabarger drew a walk. Winders smashed a hard grounder that the Devil third baseman couldn't handle, and as the ball rolled into foul territory in left field, Fronabarger was interfered with by a Greeneville infielder as he tried to circle second base. He awarded third base by an alert umpire, who made the call immediately. Meanwhile, Winders had already steamed into second, and Karson Kail came in to run for him as sophomore Landry Fronabarger – Brady's younger brother – stepped to the plate.

With the wind still briskly blowing directly out to left field, and down to his last strike out on a 1-and-2 count, Landry lifted a high fly ball into that jet stream as Greeneville outfielder Jaxon Winter tried his best to negotiate its descent. But the ball apparently wasn't interested in making a deal, and – after Winter had turned around twice while moving toward the fence – fell to the ground at the base of the fence.

Brady was ready to tag up if the ball was caught, and therefore scored the go-ahead run easily. Kail, who could only go halfway to third until he saw the ball drop, then turned on the jets and scored ahead of the relay throw with a slide across home plate. It was a two-run double for Landry, and Crockett suddenly led 3-1.

"I was just doing my job," Landry said after the game, before adding emotionally, "it's kind of hard to talk right now." When Landry Fronabarger is at a loss for words, you know something monumental must have occurred.

Gifted now with a two-run advantage, Winders – who hasn't been on the losing end of a decision all season – got even more serious, pitching around a two-out single to retire the Devils in the fifth and retiring them in order in the sixth, even catching a pop-up himself for the first out. All that remained now was for Proctor and his fiery pitcher to stay on the same page.

That "page" would be Winders' fastball, which he blew by Greeneville's three-hole hitter Begley for the first out in the seventh. Crockett's Mr. Baseball – however sleepy he may have been at this point – was ready to finish his business.

Momentarily delayed when cleanup man Harmon drilled a long double over Willis' head in center, business-finishing was back on track when Winders blazed another heater past opposing pitcher Crosby for out #2. The Cavs were a single out away from claiming the school's first-ever team state championship , and Crockett's crowd – vocal all day and completely surrounding the seating area near the visiting team's dugout, and several rows deep at that – rose to its feet with rousing encouragement for their boys.

On a 2-and-1 pitch, a 'routine' ground ball began making its way toward second baseman Austin. But no ground ball is strictly routine when a state championship is on the line, and as the ball was bouncing toward Austin, the entire crowd went silent. One spectator later said, "The whole place got totally silent, and then the ground literally started shaking."

It was shaking because the significantly relieved Austin successfully made his throw to Brady Fronabarger at first as the capacity Crockett crowd exploded with joy and delight. Brady quickly stuffed the final out baseball into his back pocket. Smart kid – now with a lifetime souvenir.
Austin's mother Holly expressed that final play in language to which virtually every athletic parent can relate: "Literally when I saw it going to Aiden, I believe I saw Jesus and then when I came back the game was over and we were CHAMPS!!!"

Talk about Someone who knew how to finish His business…
Anyway, as the roar upgraded in volume, Winders tossed his glove and hat into the air and began stomping around toward left field, eluding the bear hug Proctor was trying to apply and instead initiating the traditional "dogpile of champions" as Cavalier after Cavalier piled on top. Crockett's stellar assistant coaches – Jacob Clark, Boone Parlow, and Matt Mosier – exchanged embraces out near the dogpile. Smith hovered near the dugout, just bending over and grabbing his knees, overcome with emotion. When his family joined him on the field, there aren't adequate words to describe the spectacular mixture of love, joy, pride, accomplishment, respect, and – yes – relief.

After the celebration and trophy presentation, Mosier described the moment as "maybe the most surreal feeling I've ever had. To be in the dugout this whole year, to see the effort that's been put in, to know just how hard it is to pull off something like this – and it's really hard – it's just indescribable."

"Being a part of this team has been the biggest blessing," Brady Fronabarger said. "I'm grateful that my teammates and coaches made my last year of high school baseball unforgettable. Nobody is more deserving than Coach Brad. He put in more hours that nobody saw to get us where we are.
"Being able to bring a state championship to Crockett County is extremely special. After all the support the fans showed us this year, I'm glad we could bring home the gold for them."

Oh, and that souvenir ball he had in his pocket? When Smith was meeting in a group with his seniors while Crockett's contingent of fans milled around, taking pictures, sharing hugs, exchanging memories, and just generally not wanting to leave the scene – Fronabarger quietly slipped him the ball.

THE NEW GUYS: Two faces new to the Cavalier baseball program were instrumental in Crockett's state championship run. One – Coach Brad Smith – was in charge. The other – transfer senior Kilburn – earnestly followed.

Smith – making his fifth appearance as a head coach in the state championships – came to Crockett County from Tipton-Rosemark Academy and immediately saw the potential this team had.

"It started this summer in the weight room," Smith said. "I knew what these players had been through – four coaches in three years – but I had to gain their trust and earn their respect. As we began to work together, our seniors – what a great group of seniors we have! – bought in to what we were bringing, even though it was new and different.

"They not only bought in, they led by example. Then we had a setback when we learned Brady wouldn't be able to pitch because of some arm trouble. At that point one of my goals was to get him to throw at least one inning before the end of the regular season. We were able to do that only because Brady put in the work, followed his training program, and regained the strength. And we got him in for the final inning of a 17-2 game.

"If you had told me that we would have the record we achieved without Brady being able to throw in the whole regular season, I would have said you were crazy. But then we were able to use him in relief in the district and region tournaments. We didn't have to use him in the Sectional. And everyone saw what he did here in Murfreesboro, getting a win and two saves. That was huge for us.

"But we don't get this championship without George Randall throwing four innings of great relief in our first elimination game, or without Mason coming up big with his start in the next one, and then Jameson Bushart throwing four innings in the next one. And what can you say about Carter? Throwing that gem today after catching two ballgames that we absolutely had to win on the day before? He's a dawg, man.

"There are so many great things about this run. Nash coming over to join us. All the comeback wins. The long winning streak. Those big games with South Gibson. Forty wins. FORTY! Beating Heritage twice on Thursday when they were the only unbeaten team and had to lose twice. Do people realize how hard it is to do that? And our guys did it."

Smith said Friday's championship game was the ultimate testament to what he believes as a coach and seeing his players respond.

"I believe in the baseball gods," he said. "I believe in fate. I believe in respecting the game and playing the game the right way. I believe that gets rewarded, and I believe WE play the game the right way. And to look outside the fences and see all these wonderful Crockett people here. As we started winning, we saw the crowds start growing. So many people that our concession stand ran out of food at the district tournament. So we brought in an extra food truck for the region, and it ran out of food! Stuff like that doesn't just happen by accident.

"The Crockett County people have accepted me here. They didn't have to – but they've not only taken me in, they've given their support in the most incredible ways. And this week in Murfreesboro has topped them all, even with all the rain delays and late nights and site changes – here they still are!

"There's something special about Crockett County, and I'm so glad to be a part of it now."

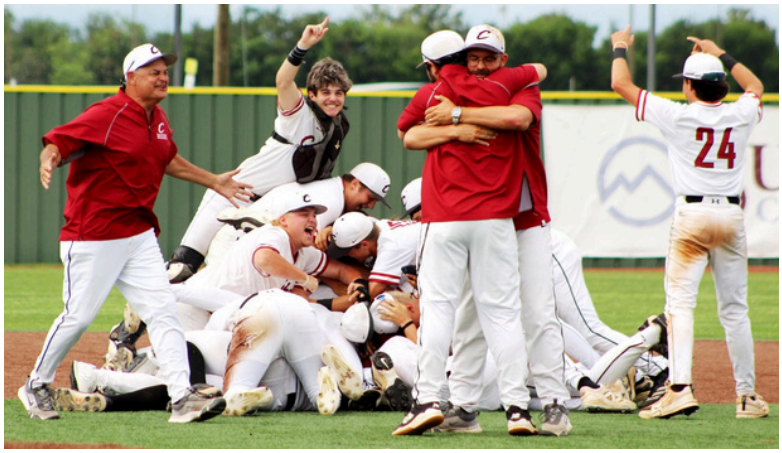
The other new guy is glad too.
"This season was magical," Kilburn said. "I could never imagine I would get to be a part of. Moving from USJ to Crockett this year was an extremely difficult decision and adjustment to make, but I knew that the Lord put it on my heart for a reason. I could write an entire essay on how much this team, school, and community means to me.

"I was immediately met this year with hospitality from every single teacher and classmate. I am especially thankful for Brady, Carter, Callan, Coach Smith, and Coach Clark for helping me through the hard adjustment. And the fact that we started working out every day from August to now makes it mean even more to me because I saw every rep that went into our success this year and I know for a fact that there is nobody more deserving of this than my coaches and teammates.

"There is also no doubt in my mind that we are the most hard-working team in the entire state – not just 3A but the state of Tennessee. So to go out there every game and see the hard work and pain we endured pay off means the world to me. And to have the whole county behind us every step of the way makes it that much more special.

"Running in from right field and lying at the bottom of the dogpile on the last play of the season is something I will never forget. Ever. God was with us through this entire season, and it was extremely apparent how He blessed each of us. This championship means more than just a baseball game, or even baseball season, but something that the county of Crockett deserves, and we all could not be more honored to take the trophy back to such an amazing place. I am beyond blessed to be able to call myself a Cav."
Smith still shakes his head when he thinks about what just happened.

"I mean, this is the kind of stuff they write books about and make movies," he laughed. "What a ride!"
For 2026, the office is closed. The business is FINISHED.



Above: The State Championship Dogpile. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Below: A special group of seniors (left to right): Callan Willis, Jaxon Moore, Sam Proctor, Carter Winders, Brady Fronabarger, and Nash Kilburn. (Photo by Ron Barry)





Above: Coach Smith shares an emotional moment after winning the title. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Above: Carter Winders was ready to finish the Cavaliers' business. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Below: Carter Winders reset his mind for the game's continuation after the rain delay, and he picked up two third-inning strikeouts. (Photo by Ron Barry)



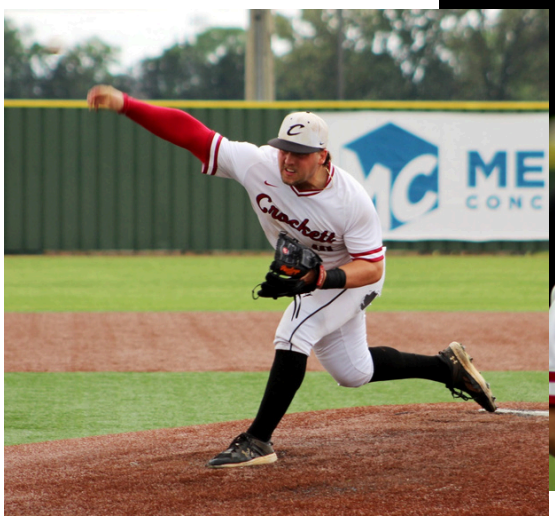
Left: As the game began, Crockett's first two batters hit bullets, but they were caught. Brady Fronabarger's single up the middle was the game's first hit. (Photo by Ron Barry)

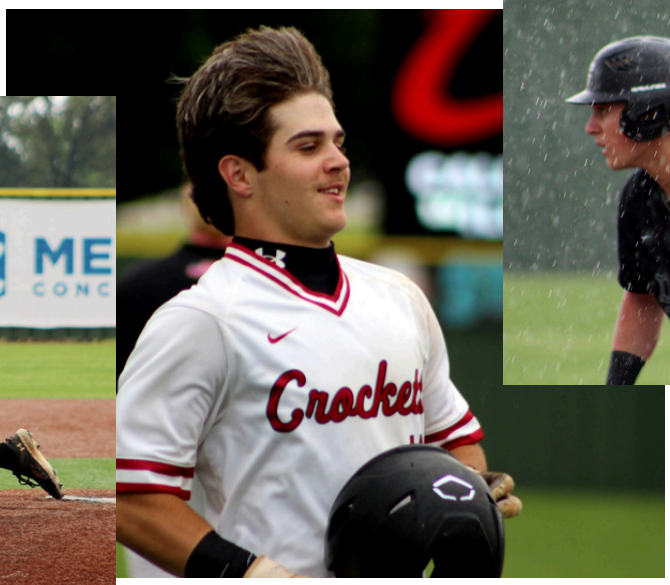
Below: By the bottom of the second, these are the conditions Fronabarger and company were facing. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Left: Sam Proctor's RBI double to left tied the game at 1-1 in the fourth inning. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Below: Brody Parlow snared this Greeneville liner to end the fourth, one of several solid outfield plays he made in a brisk wind. (Photo by Ron Barry)







Above: Mason Ray is congratulated in the dugout by Jaxon Moore (17) and Ryder Williams after scoring Crockett's first run. (Photo by Ron Barry)

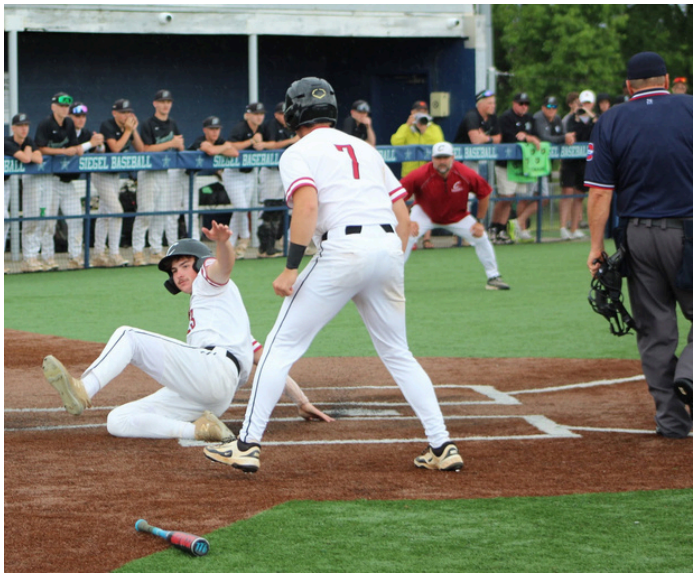




Left: In the Cavalier fifth, Landry Fronabarger clubbed a two-run double to the left field fence, giving Crockett its 3-1 lead. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Above: Nash Kilburn was having tough luck at the plate, crushing two straight liners right at the Greene Devil first baseman. (Photo by Ron Barry)

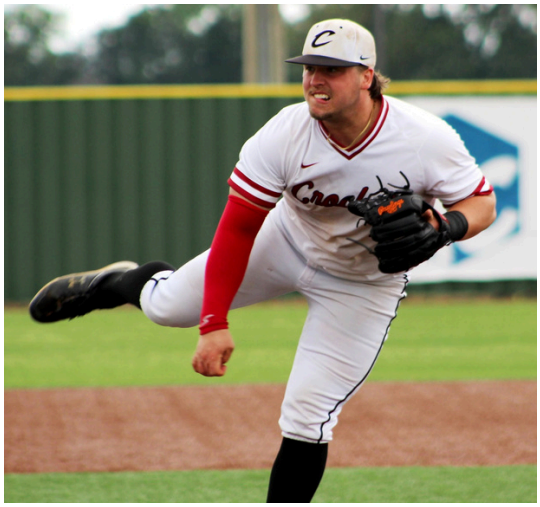


Left: Brady Fronabarger scored from third on his brother's double, and watches as courtesy runner Karson Kail slides across home plate behind him. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Below: By the seventh inning -- three outs away from a title -- all Crockett needed was for Sam Proctor and Carter Winders to be on the same page. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Below: Winders may have gotten even stronger by the seventh, offsetting a Greeneville double with two strikeouts on his blazing fastball. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Above: Given a two-run lead, Carter Winders really started dealing in the bottom of the fifth. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Below: In the sixth, Carter Winders even caught a pop-up himself for the first out and sailed through the inning. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Below: And when Aiden Austin threw out the final Greene Devil after fielding a grounder, the Cavaliers were state champions for the first time. (Photo by Ron Barry)









Left: Seniors Callan Willis and Sam Proctor savor the moment and their years together as teammates. (Photo by Ron Barry)

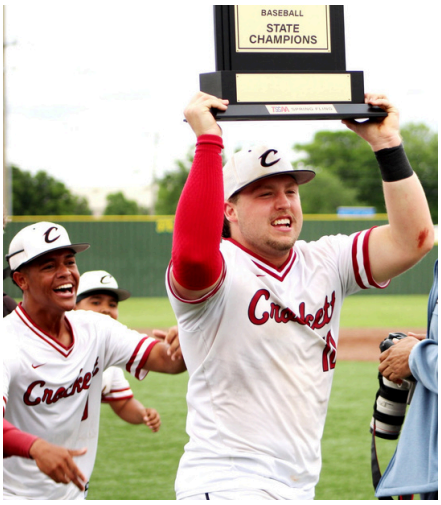
Below: Coach Brad Smith accepts his plaque from the TSSAA ... (Photo by Ron Barry)

... and later shows his appreciation for senior standout Brady Fronabarger. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Above: As a solemn Greeneville coach exits the field (foreground), Crockett players joyously dogpile in the outfield. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Right: Carter Winders: 7 innings, 3 hits allowed, 1 unearned run, no walks, 7 strikeouts -- after catching a doubleheader the previous day. (Photo by Ron Barry)

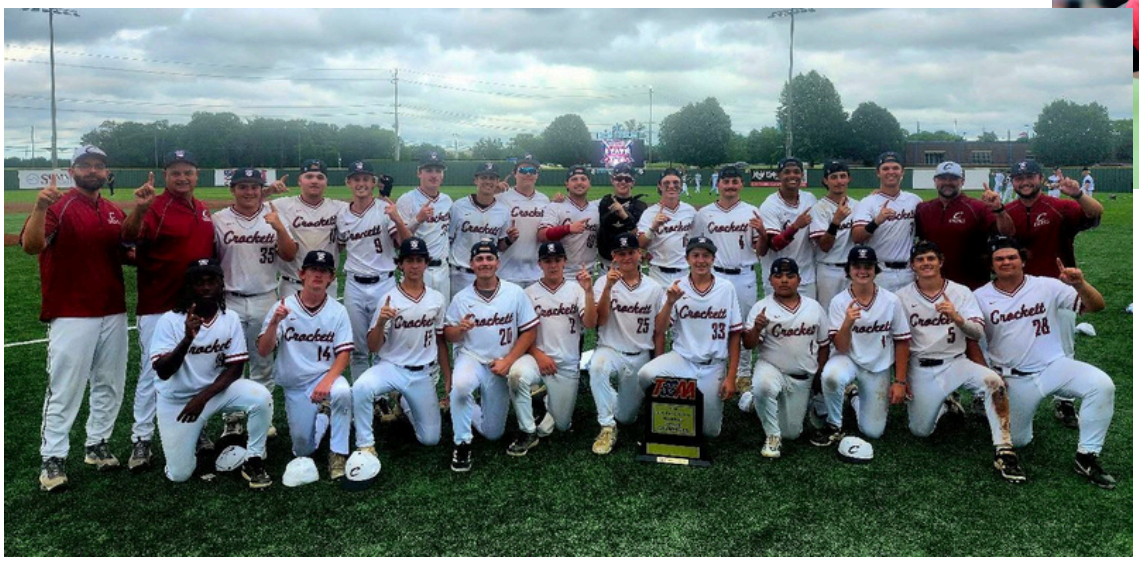
Below: Brady Fronabarger took the final out ball from his back pocket and gave it to Coach Brad Smith in a final group meeting with the seniors. (Photo by Beth Williams)











Left: Your 2026 TSSAA Class AAA State Baseball Champions. (Photo by Beth Williams)