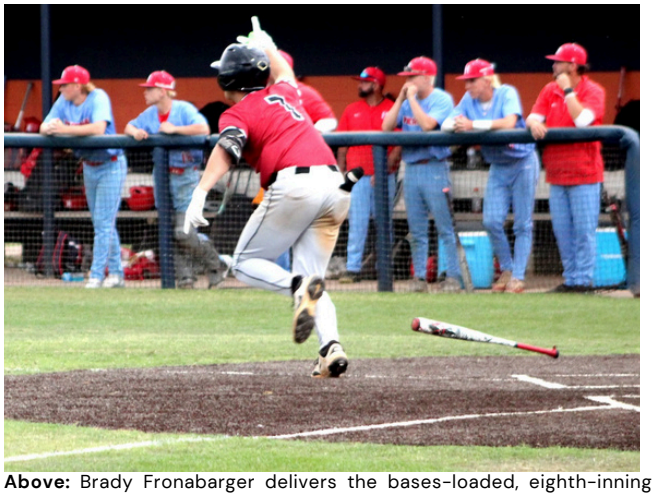
RESILIENT CAVALIERS STAMPEDE INTO TSSAA STATE BASEBALL CHAMPIONSHIP GAME



Above: Brady Fronabarger delivers the bases-loaded, eighth-inning single that points the way to the TSSAA State Championship Game for Crockett County. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Brady Fronabarger has been dreaming about this moment "probably since I was a little kid, but definitely by the start of my freshman year."

Carter Winders did a few things you'd expect a "Mr. Baseball" winner to do.

Nash Kilburn has been hotter than volcanic lava.

And Jameson Bushart? He was just minding his own business in the dugout when tabbed to become the unlikeliest hero of the whole handful of them Thursday in Murfreesboro.

Because each of these young gentlemen from Crockett County stepped up – along with several more teammates – the 2026 Cavaliers will play for the TSSAA Class AAA State Baseball Championship Friday vs. Greeneville at 11 a.m. at Siegel High School.

At the start of Thursday's tournament play, Coach Brad Smith's Cavs were in the unenviable position of needing to defeat talented Heritage High School twice to earn a berth in the title game. The Mountaineers from Maryville were the ones who dropped Crockett into the losers bracket on Wednesday, edging the Cavs 8-6 in a contest in which errors and walks basically handed the victors four runs.

That result forced Crockett to play another rain-delayed game – nearly all the way to midnight – but the Cavs prevailed 12-6 over Liberty Creek to gain another shot (or two) at Heritage.
And after coming from behind to win the first rematch when Kilburn's second home run of the game – a three-run shot in the sixth inning off lefty Braydin Davis, who was brought in specifically to face Kilburn – gave Crockett an 8-6 victory, the stage was set for a classic confrontation to see who would join Greeneville in Friday's duel for the State crown.

What it eventually came down to was this: In the bottom of the eighth inning – that's right, it went extras – Heritage and Crockett were tied 6-6 when George Randall drew a walk after being down in the count 0-and-2. Incredibly, the same thing then happened with next batter Mason Ray. Sam Proctor followed by laying down an efficient sacrifice bunt that moved both runners over.

With the infield drawn in for a potential play at the plate, Callan Willis smashed a sharp grounder to Heritage shortstop Gaven French, who was able to hold Randall at third as he threw to first for the second out.

That brought Kilburn to the plate. Davis was once again pitching in relief for the Mountaineers, and after a brief conference on the mound, they decided they wanted no part of the Cav senior again. He'd already doubled off the centerfield fence in the first and singled in the Cavs' fifth run in the second – after his two-homer effort in the day's opening battle.

The Mountaineers intentionally walked Kilburn to load the bases for Fronabarger, who has signed to play college baseball at Tennessee Tech next season. So what was on the mind of the future Golden Eagle as he went to the batter's box?

"The stats won't show it, but I'd already barreled up three balls in this game," Fronabarger said, "so I was confident. I was just looking for any way to get my team into the championship game, and I wanted to be aggressive."

Check off both of those boxes. Fronabarger rifled the first pitch on a rope into right field – exactly halfway between the first and second basemen – and pinch-runner Brady Parlow raced home with the winning run as Fronabarger was mobbed by his teammates and a loud capacity crowd from Crockett County shouted its approval.

But that moment wouldn't have happened without a couple of significant mood-lifters from Winders and Bushart.

When state tournament contenders reach the third day of competition, they often are in the position of having to piece-meal seven innings of pitching due to pitch-count regulations. And that's why Crockett opened this game with freshman Cole Summar on the mound, who had never thrown a single frame at the varsity level.

Summar was instructed to throw strikes and let the chips fall where they may, and he retired two of the first four guys he faced. But Heritage has a deep lineup of hitters, and they started finding gaps as the next four batters did enough damage to put four runs on the board and get the Mountaineer side of the crowd fired up.

Now down 4-0, Crockett did what it's done all season to build its amazing 39-4 record: show resilience. Willis fouled off three two-strike pitches to draw a leadoff walk. Kilburn put another dent in the centerfield fence. Fronabarger hit a hard grounder which shortstop French threw away at first, allowing two runs to score. And then Winders – who always seems to find ways to lead this club by example – tattooed a 2-and-0 pitch over the fence in center, and the 4-0 deficit was erased as the momentum swung back in Crockett's direction.

Smith decided then to bring in Bushart to pitch the second inning. He'd thrown all of four varsity frames in his sophomore season, but he's a fearless southpaw who competes.

"I had no idea how long I would throw," Bushart said, acknowledging that the last time he'd pitched was probably in the final JV game about six weeks ago. "I was just going to give it everything I've got for as long as I could, until Coach Smith came to take me out. It was fun – and it worked out pretty well."

So well that Bushart locked down the Mountaineer attack for four shutout innings, giving Crockett the chance to tack on additional runs in the second and fourth frames to gain a 6-4 edge. Kilburn singled in the fifth tally and Willis singled in the sixth one, and Bushart kept Heritage at bay, even pitching around a leadoff double from French in the fifth.

In the top of the sixth, Bushart walked the first two Mountaineers – "The strike zone was pretty tight all day, but I think he missed a couple of curve balls there," he said – and the Cavs turned to Fronabarger. A single loaded the bases, followed by a strikeout. But then Teagan Ruehling slashed a hard liner at shoulder height of third baseman Randall, and the ball ticked off the top of his glove and hugged the left-field line, bringing in the tying runs. The Cavs escaped further damage when Aiden Austin backhanded a sizzling grounder up the middle and flipped it to shortstop Ray for a force-out.

Crockett left the go-ahead run on third in the bottom of the sixth and didn't threaten in the seventh, but Fronabarger had settled in by that point and retired the Mountaineers in order in the top of the eighth. And when Randall drew the leadoff walk, Cavalier history was put in motion.
Kilburn's two-homer, five-RBI performance in Thursday's opener made a winner out of pitcher Ray, who delivered five solid frames for the Cavs before Fronabarger completed the final two innings for the save. Willis had a hit and two walks, scoring three of Crockett's eight runs.

Friday's title encounter with Greeneville was set up by an 11-6 triumph over Alcoa by the Devils, who – like Crockett – are also 3-1 in the tournament.

SOFTBALL: Crockett County has another team still active in the TSSAA Spring Fling, but the Lady Cavaliers need a Friday morning victory to claim a berth in the softball State Championship Game.

Winners of their first two State contests this week, Coach Baron Jimmerson's Lady Cavaliers dropped a 9-7 decision to Alcoa despite a double and the first home run of the season by Fallon Beaird and a three-RBI performance from Emilee Chandler. But the Lady Tornadoes countered with a 13-hit attack that included two home runs of their own.

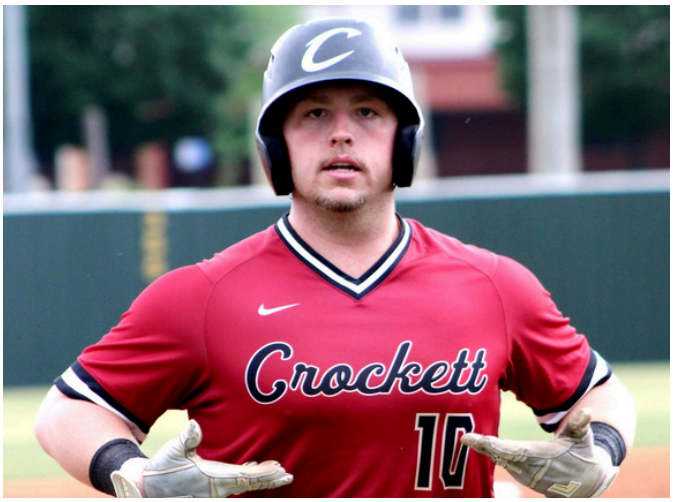
Haley Leforgee hammered a pair of doubles for Crockett and Wesley Thornton – who walked three times (twice intentionally) and hit a double – scored three runs. Alcoa has five players who have signed to play college ball, including Tennessee-bound Halle Bailey, who collected three hits and scored three times.

The Lady Tornadoes took the lead on an infield error in the bottom of the fourth and held off the Lady Cavaliers from there. The two teams will meet again Friday at 10:00 a.m. at Cedar Stone Field #1 in Smyrna for the right to face McNairy Central in the State Championship on Saturday.



Above: Carter Winders hit a two-run homer that brought the Cavaliers back into a 4-4 tie in Thursday's Game 2 vs. Heritage ... (Photo by Ron Barry)

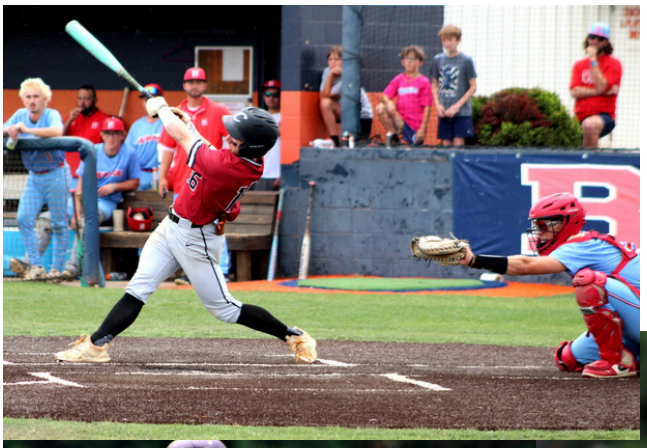
Below: ... but before he tapped helmets at home plate he made sure everybody in the ballpark knew for whom he played. (Photo by Ron Barry)





Above: It took a brilliant relief job from sophomore Jameson Bushart to keep Crockett in it in Game 2 vs. Heritage Thursday. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Below: Callan Willis jokes with first base coach Jacob Clark after smacking a run-scoring single in Game 2 Thursday that put Crockett ahead 6-4. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Left: In Game 1 Thursday, the Cavaliers came from behind on this three-run blast by Nash Kilburn in the sixth inning ... (Photo by Ron Barry)

Below: ... which put a big smile on the senior outfielder's face as he rounded third base, (Photo by Ron Barry)



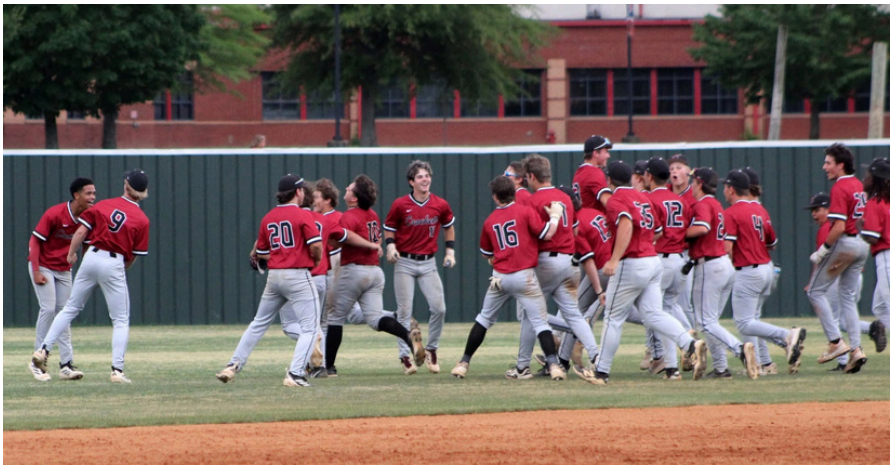




Above: Mason Ray delivered a clutch pitching start of five solid innings in Game 1 Thursday, keeping Crockett afloat in the tournament. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Right: Brady Fronabarger and Nash Kilburn celebrate their entry into the TSSAA State Championship Game while a Heritage infielder feels the pain of coming up just short. (Photo by Ron Barry)





Above: A joyous group of players surrounds Brady Fronabarger after his game-winning hit that sends the club to the TSSAA title game Friday. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Right: Little Parker Mosier goes running onto the field in search of his daddy, assistant coach Matt Mosier. (Photo by Ron Barry)





Above: Fallon Beaird slammed her first home run of the season and also had a double in Crockett's 9-7 softball loss to Alcoa Thursday. (Photo by Ron Barry)



above: Wesley Thornton scored three of the Lady Cavs' runs after being walked three times and hitting a double. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Below: Emilee Chandler drove in three runs for the Lady Cavs, who have a rematch with Alcoa Friday morning at 10:00 at Smyrna's Cedar Stone Field #1. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Above: Haley Leforgee had two doubles for Crockett against Alcoa. (Photo by Ron Barry)

