ELIZABETHTON ELIMINATES LADY CAVALIERS FROM TSSAA STATE VOLLEYBALL TOURNAMENT

Above: Kira Bray (18) accepts congratulations from her teammates after making a key kill to pull Crockett even near the end of the opening set Wednesday. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Crockett County opened the door just wide enough for Elizabethton to stick one foot inside… and then the rest of the Fighting Cyclones blew the whole door off its hinges.

Playing in the opening match of the consolation bracket of the TSSAA State Volleyball Tournament, Coach Andrew Laman's Lady Cavaliers – after giving up a fairly sizeable lead in the early going – rallied from behind to defeat Elizabethton 25-23 in the first set. But in failing to put away the Fighting Cyclones – yes, that's their nickname – they allowed Elizabethton to gain some considerable confidence, which manifested over the remainder of the match in an enthusiastic, "go-all-out-on-every-ball-no-matter-what" mentality that enabled the East Tennesseans to capture the next three sets, winning 25-16, 25-21, and 25-21.

The Fighting Cyclones were crashing into and over each other much of the time, if that's what required keeping the ball in the air, and once they had a setting pass established, their front line put the ball away with effective power kills. Crockett – while continuing to play hard and rallying from behind to keep each set close – made many more errors than Elizabethton and just seemed to have every conceivable break go against it: balls off the top of the net almost always fell on the Lady Cavs' side; several tip shots aimed to avoid blockers would go out of bounds by inches; and even a few unsatisfactorily explained officials' calls that left the Crockett staff befuddled.

But by far, the deciding factors in the match were Elizabethton's scrappy, hustling play and too many unforced errors by the Lady Cavs.

"It was definitely a frustrating game," Laman said afterward, "especially believing we're the better team. We just did not play our best. We gave them points from too many errors on our end. I don't want to blame referees but it just seemed like we couldn't catch a break there either. But I'm for sure proud of our girls for competing and not letting up. It's still a whole lot better to end the season here (at the State Tournament) instead of back in West Tennessee."

Crockett opened up a quick 12-7 advantage in the first set on a series of kills by Wesley Thornton and Madi Collins, but soon after it took two more Thornton kills to get back in front 19-18. Elizabethton went ahead again but a Kira Bray smash tied it at 21-all. A nicely-placed touch shot by Crockett's Emilee Chandler provided the eventual set point as the Lady Cavs survived 25-23.

But it was obvious the Fighting Cyclones were feeling much more confident than they seemed to show in pre-match warmups and in the early going of Set #1. Still, Crockett was hanging in, down 11-13, when Elizabethton ran off six straight points to push the margin to 19-11, and Laman's club couldn't overcome it.

The third set was an all-out war, beginning with an Elizabethton blitz that produced a quick 9-2 lead. Crockett kept fighting back, getting within a point twice (at 13-14 and 20-21) but then flubbing what should have been an easy put-away. Despite two huge blocks for points by freshman Addie Whitby – arguably, Crockett's most consistent player Wednesday – the Fighting Cyclones prevailed 25-21.

Set #4 featured more of the same. Elizabethton jumped ahead 9-5 and 12-6, but a Collins kill brought the Lady Cavs to within two at 13-15. The teams exchanged points on several long rallies over the next few minutes, but the Fighting Cyclones slid ahead 23-19, got match point at 24-21, and held on when the final Crockett service return of the day hit the top of the net tape and fell straight back down out of any Lady Cav's reach.

Elizabethton advances to play Hume-Fogg out of Nashville Thursday morning at 9:30 for a shot at the consolation championship against the winner of Upperman and Signal Mountain, which defeated Sullivan East on Wednesday. The winners bracket State Championship Match will be, for the third straight year, between Valor College Prep and Dyer County..

Crockett finishes the season 30-13, having reached the State Tournament for the fourth consecutive year for the first time in school history

By Ron Barry

Above: Wesley Thornton had her power game working early, slamming this ball ... (Photo by Ron Barry)

Below: ... straight between two Elizabethton blockers. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Below: Two photos summarize the frustrating day for Crockett. The first is THIS one: Guess which side of the net this ball fell on? It seemed that way all day. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Above: The second is THIS one: On the next-to-last point of the match, Wesley Thornton picks herself up off the floor after diving in vain for a ball just inches out of her reach. It also seemed THAT way all day. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Right: Freshman Addie Whitby (2) was arguably Crockett's most consistent performer in the Wednesday match. (Photo by Ron Barry)

By Ron Barry

Above: Emilee Chandler was all smiles after executing a perfectly-placed touch shot to win the first set 25-23. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Left: Kira Bray (right) and Wesley Thornton celebrate an early Set #1 point. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Below: Coach Andrew Laman already has a couple of 30-win (or 30+) seasons and State Tournament appearances on his ledger. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Above: Later in the match, Lakyn Forsythe had to comfort Kira Bray after an unclear official's ruling -- which seems to surprise Addie Davidson and Lola Bailey besides Forsythe -- reverses a point originally awarded to the Lady Cavaliers. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Above: Carmen Claybrooks (13) hits a winner as teammates (from left) Addie Davidson, Wesley Thornton, Madi Collins, and Nataly Amador back her up. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Right: Madi Collins made sure THIS ball stayed on the Elizabethton side of the net. (Photo by Ron Barry)

By Ron Barry

Above: Nataly Amador powers this return over the net. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Left: The next time we see Wesley Thornton in her #20 jersey, she'll also have her bat and glove. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Below: To close the volleyball season, let's salute our seniors: Madi Collins. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Above: A showdown of #11s -- Lakyn Forsythe is ready for her counterpart. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Below: Kira Bray. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Above: Addie Davidson. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Right: Carmen Claybrooks. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Above: Tink Willis, with assistant coach Lanie Mosier. (Photo by Ron Barry)