CLAYBROOKS SPARKLES IN CROCKETT VOLLEYBALL MIRACLE COMEBACK WIN AT LAKELAND



Right: Madi Collins used her 12-point service run to really help turn the match around in Set #3. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Carmen Claybrooks is just about the last person who would ever brag on herself.

So a very grateful teammate was happy to do it for her.
"She played out of her mind!" said Lakyn Forsythe. "Carmen Claybrooks was the difference in that match."

"That match" was the Region 7-AA Volleyball Tournament semifinal contest between visiting Crockett County and host Lakeland Prep Monday night. The winner would move on to the tournament championship game on Tuesday and would also solidify its berth in a Thursday Sectional battle, the last hurdle to clear to gain entry in the TSSAA State Tournament.

The loser would pack the jerseys away until next season.
And with their backs pressed so firmly up against the wall of elimination they were threatening to push it down, the main reason Coach Andrew Laman's Lady Cavaliers survived to play another day is because Carmen Claybrooks morphed into Supergirl for the final three sets – which Crockett won to pull off the rarely-achieved "reverse sweep."

In the best-of-five encounter, Lakeland Prep won the first two sets 25-22 and 25-20 and had the momentum of Usain Bolt running downhill.

"We could have easily folded right then and called it quits," Laman said afterward, "except these girls don't quit. I am so proud of what they just did."

Set #3 began innocently enough. The Lady Cavs jumped to a 3-0 lead, indicating – in the immortal words of "Monty Python and the Holy Grail" – "I'm not dead yet!" But just as quickly, the Lady Lions tied it up at 4-4 before Crockett scored the point that brought senior Madi Collins into the server's spot in the rotation.

Collins, who was selected by the coaches as the "Server of the Year" in District 13-AA but was somewhat inconsistent with it during last week's tournament, proceeded to rip off 12 consecutive winning points to push the visitors ahead 17-4 before LPS was able to break the streak.

Needing just one more set victory to earn its own Sectional berth, Lakeland bounced back again to cut the margin to 19-15 and force a Laman timeout.

It was about that same time that Claybrooks – who generally plays in the back row and has a dependable and accurate serve, but only occasionally stays in the rotation for front-row glimpses – quietly slipped on her cape.

Contributing a couple of kills down the stretch, Claybrooks helped Crockett hang on for a 25-19 Set #3 triumph and kept the locker room storage closet empty for at least one more set.

The Lady Lions, a very talented team led by power hitter Kaiya Rogers and sophomore Olivia Reyes – who has mastered the art of hitting nose-diving kill shots from the back row – immediately took a 4-0 advantage in the fourth set and looked extremely determined to keep Crockett from raining on their parade. But the Lady Cavs fought back to tie it at 8-8 and 9-9 only to see LPS put another run together to go up 15-11.

Crockett's Wesley Thornton belted one of her power slams to get it to 15-12 and then Claybrooks tallied three straight to deadlock the set again at 15-15. It went to 16-16 and 17-17 before the now-desperate Lady Cavs used a series of diving digs by Jentry Elmore, Addie Davidson, Nataly Amador, Thornton, and Claybrooks herself to claw back to a 22-22 standoff.

Thornton took over the serve at that score and delivered a winner before Claybrooks won yet another point, giving the Lady Cavs a set point at 24-22 – and when center hitter Kira Bray smacked down a ball floating near the net from the LPS side, Crockett had a 25-22 win and the match was now dead-even at two sets apiece.

In a fifth set, the first team to reach 15 points (with a margin of at least two) is the victor. And you could almost feel all the pressure in the LPS gymnasium swing over to the Lady Lions' side.

By Ron Barry

Thornton kept the power slam going early for Crockett, accounting for four of the first seven marks as the visitors stormed out front 7-4. Bray spiked another winner to make it 8-4 before Claybrooks – now in a zone she admitted later she'd probably never been in before – punched down two more kills for a 10-4 edge as the Cavalier fans were ecstatic.

Freshman Addie Whitby – whose contributions in the winning sets were monumental for the Lady Cavs – made it 11-4 with a block, and another from Bray pushed it to 12-4. After the hosts broke through again for a couple, the now-stratospheric Claybrooks produced winners on two more shots, boosting Crockett to match point at 14-6.

Lakeland rallied to make it 14-9, but then Collins put away a ball that had been saved by Whitby on a Lady Lion drop shot – and the miracle comeback had been achieved.

So… what was Claybrooks thinking as all this newfound excitement was going on around her down the stretch?
"I wasn't really thinking anything," she laughed. "I was just jumping and cheering!"

"What I like most about Carmen," Laman said, "is that nothing ever seems to rattle her, good or bad. She stays on a very even keel. We used her staying in the rotation more tonight because we just needed to give Lakeland a different look after the first two sets. They have a lot of talent and their coach has done a really good job with them; I think they're better than they were last year. I'm just really proud of our girls. I don't have anything negative to say."

The triumph was extra special for Laman because it came on his wedding anniversary. His wife Abby said that this win was all she really wanted.

"It was the best present we could both have," she said.
Crockett is now 29-10 on the season. Before Thursday night's Sectional attempt to return to the State Tournament for the third straight season, the Lady Cavs get their fourth shot of the fall against Dyer County in Newbern Tuesday in the Region championship matchup. It's set for a 6 p.m. start. The Lady Choctaws sailed past Bolivar Central Monday night without breaking a sweat.



Above: Carmen Claybrooks said she was "just jumping …" (Photo by Ron Barry)

Below: … "and cheering!" Monday night at Lakeland Prep. (Photo by Ron Barry)





Right: When Madi Collins (6) put away match point after a save by Addie Whitby (2), Carmen Claybrooks got to combine jumping and cheering. (Photo by Ron Barry)

By Ron Barry



Above: And after the Lady Cavs pulled off the win in Set #4, Lakyn Forsythe (left) is there to remind them, "One more set!" (Photo by Ron Barry)

Below: The vastly improved Kira Bray (18) has been teaming with Wesley Thornton on the front line to make an impressive blocking duo. (Photo by Ron Barry)





Above: As Carmen Claybrooks continued to hit winner after winner, even she was a bit taken aback as her teammates rushed to congratulate her. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Left: The miracle comeback win was an extra-special anniversary present for Coach Andrew Laman and his wife Abby. (Photo by Ron Barry)





Above: Many of Crockett's points still came to conventional way: on a Lakyn Forsythe set ... (Photo by Ron Barry)

Left: ... to a slamming Wesley Thornton. (Photo by Ron Barry)

By Ron Barry





Left: Addie Whitby provided some key plays down the stretch even though she's still a freshman. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Below: Nataly Amador goes low to make an accurate pass. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Above: Forsythe-to-Thornton slams -- or Kira Bray blocks -- often resulted in scenes like this one. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Below: Crockett might have been in even more of a dogfight if hustling Jentry Elmore didn't go all out chasing down Lady Lion shots. (Photo by Ron Barry)





Above: Lakyn Forsythe looks extremely serious in this called discussion with the the lead official. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Below: Wesley Thornton (left) and others kept encouraging Carmen Claybrooks (foreground) as they realized she had the hot hand ... (Photo by Ron Barry)



Above: Addie Davidson contributed her usual solid back row game. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Below: And you know if a miracle comeback needs inspiration, Crockett always has just the ticket: irrepressible manager Tink Willis. (Photo by Ron Barry)









Left: ... and her performance in this Region 7-AA Tournament may be one the Crockett fans remember as "The Carmen Claybrooks Match." (Photo by Ron Barry)

Above: The final scoreboard. (Photo by Ron Barry)