

Notes on the 2025-26 NCHSAA Realignment and Its Impact on High School Tennis

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Background

In March 2023, the member schools of the NCHSAA adopted a bylaw amendment which limits the number of schools in each classification to a maximum of 64. In addition, the bylaw language specifies that a school's size, measured by its ADM (Average Daily Membership), is the only criteria to be used in classifying schools.

No plan was advanced by the proponents of this bylaw amendment as to how the playoffs would work, and how conferences would be formed. Those issues were left for the staff and the Board of Directors to solve. Nevertheless, the bylaw amendment was adopted with nearly 350 positive votes from the member schools.

At its April 2023 meeting, the NCHSAA Board of Directors created a Bylaw Task Force to begin the process of implementing the bylaw amendment, including the structure of state playoffs and tournaments.

In December 2023, the Bylaw Task Force Realignment Committee recommended, and the Board approved, a provision that, starting in 2025-26, there would be eight classifications for the 435+ schools that comprise the NCHSAA.

In April 2024, the task force recommended, and the Board approved, a provision that the classification for the largest schools (8A) would be limited to 32 schools. The remaining schools would be divided evenly between the remaining seven classifications.

In early October 2024, the state released its ADM numbers for the member schools, and assigned each school to a classification. There were 444 schools total, with 32 in 8A, 59 in 2A-7A, and 58 in 1A.

Throughout the fall, the task force has been meeting with coaches' associations and other stakeholders to inform the rules and regulations which will govern state playoffs and tournaments. No final decisions have been made as yet.

In December 2024, the state released the first draft of its conference assignments for 2025-26 and beyond. In early 2025, the Board of Directors will hear appeals from schools dissatisfied with their conference assignments.

In April 2025, the Board of Directors will hear the final Bylaw Task Force report and adopt a plan for the playoffs and tournaments.

Conference Assignments

As mentioned above, the NCHSAA staff and Realignment Committee have published their first draft of conference assignments for 2025-26. Two 1A schools have been classed as “independent”, and the remaining 442 schools were divided into 62 conferences.

As was widely predicted, the use of split conferences has expanded dramatically.

Of the 62 conferences, only 14 will be composed entirely of schools within the same classification. Forty-two conferences have two classifications represented, and six are three-way splits.

The prevalence of split conferences is true in all eight classifications, and is testimony to the fact that the Realignment Committee prioritized geography and natural rivalry over grouping schools of similar size.

Split Conferences by Class				
	No Split	2-Way Split	3-Way Split	Total
1A	3	8	2	13
2A	2	11	3	16
3A	2	9	5	16
4A	1	12	3	16
5A	1	13	2	16
6A	1	15	1	17
7A	2	12	1	15
8A	2	4	1	7
Total	14	42	6	62

Under the new plan, the vast majority of schools will play in split conferences. Again, this is true across all classifications.

Schools in Split Conferences By Class				
	No Split	2-Way Split	3-Way Split	Total
1A	18	36	2	56
2A	13	35	11	59
3A	12	32	15	59
4A	7	45	7	59
5A	6	51	2	59
6A	6	52	1	59
7A	12	43	4	59
8A	15	15	2	32
Total	89	309	44	442

Ten schools will be in a conference where they are the only school in their classification. Forty-six will be one of two schools in its class, and 60 will be one of three such schools.

Schools By Number of Schools in Same Class in Conference										
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	Total
1A	3	2	0	12	5	18	7	0	9	56
2A	1	10	3	20	5	6	14	0	0	59
3A	1	8	9	8	15	18	0	0	0	59
4A	1	4	15	16	10	6	7	0	0	59
5A	2	6	9	8	10	24	0	0	0	59
6A	1	8	12	20	5	6	7	0	0	59
7A	1	2	12	20	5	12	7	0	0	59
8A	0	6	0	0	5	6	7	8	0	32
Total	10	46	60	104	60	96	49	8	9	442
%	2.3%	10.4%	13.5%	23.4%	13.5%	21.6%	11.0%	1.8%	2.0%	

The extensive use of split conferences poses a number of thorny questions for the Bylaw Task Force as it considers the rules governing playoffs and tournaments.

The prevalence of split conferences informed the NCHSTCA's Individual Tournament proposal, specifically the provision to end the practice of awarding regional berths to conferences, and instead, conducting one-round qualifying events among 6-8 schools to determine regional entries. See the NCHSTCA Individual Tournament Proposal for further details. (See below.)

Will Each Classification Have Its Own Dual-Team Championship?

The bylaw language governing playoffs states the following:

When at least 25 percent of the total number of member schools, or at least half the schools in a classification, participate in a sport sanctioned by the NCHSAA, that sport shall culminate in a state championship for that classification. When less than half of the schools in a classification participate, those schools shall be grouped with schools from the next largest classification(s) not having fifty percent participation in that sport to create a state playoff bracket culminating in a multi-class state championship. If only one classification has less than fifty percent of schools participating in a sport, the schools in that classification shall have a reduced playoff bracket by one round. If that is not possible, then the schools of that classification shall be placed in the state playoffs of the next highest classification.

So, the first test is whether each classification has at least 50% of its schools playing tennis.

Tennis Teams By Class			
	Schools	Boys	Girls
8A	32	31	31
7A	59	56	55
6A	59	47	49
5A	59	54	55
4A	59	50	53
3A	59	43	44
2A	59	30	34
1A	58	11	14
Total	444	322	335

The chart indicates that all but the 1A classification satisfy the 50% rule. Each classification, other than 1A, is entitled to its own dual-team championship.

As for 1A, the language of the bylaws is ambiguous.

The 1A schools could have their own championship, and this would honor the spirit of the bylaw amendment, which was to have schools of similar size competing against one another.

Or, the schools in 1A could be lumped in with the 2A schools. This would yield a field of 47 teams, but would work against the spirit of the amendment, and eliminate the benefit of that amendment for those smallest of schools most in need of relief under the current system.

The ambiguous part of the bylaw is the phrase “If that is not possible ...” What exactly does that mean, and who determines what is “possible” or not?

Implications for the Dual-Team Championships

The 2025-26 realignment poses several interesting questions for the dual-team championships, questions which much the same for other team sports.

How many teams will make the playoffs? The Bylaw Task Force has suggested that 24 teams will be selected in 8A, and that, as a general rule, 32 teams will be selected in 1A-7A.

In tennis, if 1A remains a separate championship bracket, the field is likely to be limited to sixteen, or even eight qualifying schools.

In 2A, given the number of tennis-playing schools, it’s likely that a draw of 24 will be adopted (similar to 8A).

What will be done about schools which are the only school in their class? Will there be special provisions that these schools have to meet to qualify for the playoffs?

Will the NCHSAA continue to favor the top team in each classification of a given conference as a “champion” with preferential seeding in the brackets?

There’s been a lot of discussion about how giving preferential seeding to the teams that finish as the top team in their class in their conference creates a distortion in the bracket. It’s not unheard of for a team with an RPI in the 20’s or 30’s to be seeded as the 10th or 11th seed based on its conference standing.

Basically, the argument is that being better than one or two other schools in your conference doesn’t warrant preferential treatment as regards seeding, and that seeding should be done strictly by RPI.

The counter-argument is that teams are assigned to conferences; they don’t join them voluntarily. A school in the smaller classification in its conference will play a significant number of matches against schools in a higher classification, and that will tend to depress that school’s RPI, all other things being equal.

Expect to hear a lot of discussion on this issue in the next few months.

Implications for the Individual Tournaments

Currently, the individual tournaments are played in three stages:

- Conferences tournaments, yielding qualifiers based on a formula that assigns berths to conferences “on a percentage basis”.
- Regional tournaments, that reduce the field from 64 to 16, crown a regional champion, and assign players to specific spots in the state tournament.
- State tournaments which use a pre-determined draw, and which identify a state champion in single-elimination play.

The move to eight classifications will require more regional sites (and directors). There may be interest in combining the classifications for the individual tournaments, but, again, that cuts against the point of the bylaw amendment.

More importantly, the prevalence of split conferences will make the distribution of regional berths by conference much more problematic.

The NCHSTCA has presented a proposal to the NCHSAA to revamp the initial stage of the individual tournament, such that each regional would have two “qualifiers”, composed of 6-8 schools, and each of those qualifiers would determine eight entries in the regional.

See the NCHSTCA Individual Tournament Proposal for more details on how this proposed process would work.