

NCHSTCA Statement of Principles on Realignment and the Implementation of the 2023 NCHSAA Bylaw Amendment

Background

In March 2023, NCHSAA member schools voted by a large margin to amend its bylaws to restrict a given classification to no more than 64 schools. The bylaw amendment did not specify how the classifications would be formed, or how the state tournaments would be organized.

Soon after the bylaw amendment passed, the NCHSAA Board of Directors formed a task force to study and recommend rules and regulations to implement the bylaw amendment.

At its Winter 2023 meeting, the NCHSAA Board of Directors voted to move to an 8-classification system, starting with the 2025-26 athletic seasons.

At its Spring 2024 meeting, the NCHSAA Board voted to adopt “Big 32” schema, meaning that the 8A classification would be limited to 32 schools.

Questions about the nature of the state tournaments in various sports remain to be decided. The task force continues to work on these questions, and will make recommendations to the NCHSAA Board in the coming months.

Statement of Principles

The NC High School Tennis Coaches Association takes a keen interest in the future of high school athletics in general, and in the nature of the state tennis tournaments in particular.

In furtherance of that interest, the NCHSTCA Board of Directors, meeting in Greensboro on Friday, June 14, 2024, adopted the following statement of principles regarding the implementation of the 2023 bylaw amendment.

1. Broad Participation in State Tournaments.

If brackets are to be limited, and schools are to qualify based on regular season performance, we believe that the NCHSAA should make the brackets as large as possible. We believe that as many of our student-athletes as possible should be given the opportunity to participate in a state tournament.

2. Equitable Access to State Tournaments.

We believe that every school should have roughly the same chance of participating in state tournaments, regardless of its size. That is, in every classification, to the extent possible, the brackets should provide for a relatively equivalent percentage of schools participating in the state tournament, regardless of classification.

In particular, we object to the Bylaw Committee proposal to allow 24-28 schools in the 8A playoffs (75%-87.5% of schools), while limiting draws for the other classifications to 32 out of 58 schools in the class (55%). We believe this proposal is patently unfair to smaller schools.

3. Encouraging Better Early Round Experiences By Using Staggered Brackets in the State Tournaments

Under the current “flat bracket” model for our state tournaments, the best teams in the state are automatically paired with the worst in the first round. This creates a scenario where the outcome is pre-determined, and the weaker team has no realistic chance of victory. No one wants to play these contests, no one wants to watch, and no one learns anything. These blowout contests are bad for high school sports for a number of reasons, and should be reduced by any means possible.

We believe that the state tournament brackets should be staggered, after the model of the current ACC basketball tournament.

That is, the top quarter of entrants, based on RPI, would receive a double-bye, and the next quarter would receive a single-bye. First round contests would be played between teams in the bottom half of the field, with winners advancing to play higher-rated teams in the second and third rounds.

Such a process would reduce the number of “blowout contests”, and create a much better early round experience for average and below-average teams and players in the state tournaments.

4. Conferences Based on Geography and Local Rivalry

We believe that conferences should be created based on geography and local rivalry as the primary considerations, and that assembling a group of schools of the same classification should be a secondary concern.

Conferences composed of teams located nearby, teams which are more likely to be natural rivals, are more interesting, and championships in such conferences are more highly valued.

Short travel times reduce the amount of lost class time. More spectators from the visiting school make the trip, which creates a more exciting game environment. Gate receipts are larger, providing more funds for athletic program budgets.

5. Eliminate Conference Standing as a Criterion for Selection and Seeding

We acknowledge that building conferences based on geography and natural rivalry will result in more conferences with multiple classifications represented. These “split” conferences will have classifications with one, two, or three teams.

We believe that, in such an environment, conference standing should not be used for selection or seeding purposes. In fact, we believe this regardless of how conferences are constructed.

The current system elevates conference champions, and those schools finishing highest in a given classification of a split conference, often improving their seed by 10-15 positions. This distorts the bracket for everyone else.

We believe that beating one or two other schools is an insufficient achievement to warrant such preferential treatment in the bracket. For this reason, we believe that seeding in the state tournaments should be based exclusively on a team's RPI rating.

If the brackets are sufficiently large, every conference champion (and every "top-rated" team in a split conference) would qualify for the tournament based on its RPI. They should be placed in the bracket based on that rating alone.

Lee Matthews, NCHSTCA Secretary