

Brave new world for football playoffs

Written by Jim Ecker

Sunday, 19 October 2014 18:47 - Last Updated Sunday, 19 October 2014 19:29



Bracketology is dead.

We're not talking about brackets for March Madness and the NCAA basketball tournament. Those brackets are alive and well.

Rather, we're talking about brackets for the high school football playoffs that begin next week. Those brackets are gone.

In previous years, the IHSAA would select 32 teams in each class for the playoffs and assign them to an orderly bracket that you could follow from the first round all the way to the championship game in the UNI-Dome.

You could study the bracket, pick the winners and see how close you came to the real thing as the tournament went along.

No more.

This year, the IHSAA will select 32 teams in each class for the playoffs and announce the 16 opening-round games in each class. And that's it.

You'll have no idea who the opening-round winners will play next until the IHSAA announces the assignments for the second round. That holds true for all the rounds after that, all the way through the semifinals.

Why? Primarily, the IHSAA is trying to reduce travel time on school nights and will be looking for

Brave new world for football playoffs

Written by Jim Ecker

Sunday, 19 October 2014 18:47 - Last Updated Sunday, 19 October 2014 19:29

compact geographic matchups, although the 125-mile rule will not apply to Class 4A.

The IHSAA also will be looking to avoid rematches in the early rounds and also will try to avoid matching state powers against each other until the later rounds.

It's hardly an exact science, however.

Cedar Rapids Washington and Bettendorf are the only undefeated teams in Class 4A and are ranked 1-2 in most polls. Under the new playoff format, the IHSAA theoretically could avoid having them meet in the semifinals, assuming they both get that far, and let them play for the state title, even though they are both from the eastern side of the state.

The IHSAA could do it, but they won't. They could have No. 1 Washington face No. 4 Dowling in the semifinals, and they could have No. 2 Bettendorf meet No. 3 West Des Moines Valley in the semifinals, but they won't.

Dowling and Valley are both 7-1, so it might seem fair to have East vs. West matchups in both semifinals and let the chips fall where they may, with the possibility of two East teams or two West teams meeting in the finals.

"Theoretically, this process opens up the options and possibilities so it doesn't have to be East or West necessarily," IHSAA tournament director Todd Tharp told the Metro Sports Report last week. "But at this particular time I have no basis to determine what East school would play what West school."

Washington and Bettendorf are undefeated and ranked 1-2, but that does not mean they have the two best teams in the state. All it means is that they have the only two undefeated records in Class 4A and that some pollsters put them in the 1 and 2 spots on their ballots.

Brave new world for football playoffs

Written by Jim Ecker

Sunday, 19 October 2014 18:47 - Last Updated Sunday, 19 October 2014 19:29

Are Washington and Bettendorf better than Valley and Dowling? Maybe we'll find out, but nobody knows right now. There have been only a handful of East vs. West games during the regular season and no real basis for comparison.

Should Washington play Dowling in the semifinals? Should Bettendorf play Valley? Or should it be the other way around?

The IHSAA has eliminated the old power rankings and point system, so there's no numerical basis for seeding the teams. So how do you decide?

"Why would Cedar Rapids Washington get Valley over Dowling? I don't have any way to justify how I would determine that," said Tharp.

He's not going to use rankings, because those are subjective. And he's not going to pick names out of the hat, so it's going to stay East vs East and West vs West in the Class 4A semifinals unless somebody at the IHSAA changes their mind.

And that's not going to happen.

"There's half-a-dozen different polls out there that rank schools," said Tharp. "Who's to determine that Washington is No. 1 and Bettendorf is No. 2? I don't have a way of determining one over the other right now."

There are eight districts in each class. The top four teams in each district will make the playoffs for a field of 32 teams in each class - 4A, 3A, 2A, 1A, A and 8-Player.

The first round of the playoffs will pit a No. 1 team from one district against the No. 4 team from another district, with No. 2's facing No. 3's, based on district standings. There are no more "sister" districts, however, so it won't be neat and clean.

Brave new world for football playoffs

Written by Jim Ecker

Sunday, 19 October 2014 18:47 - Last Updated Sunday, 19 October 2014 19:29

The champion of District A could play the fourth-place team from District B in the opening round, but the runner-up from District A could face the third-place team from District C when the playoffs begin on Wednesday, Oct. 29.

The second round will be similar, based on who survived the first round. Higher seeds will play lower seeds, based on district standings.

The tricky part could come in the quarterfinals, especially if all eight district champions have won their two playoff games and are still alive.

Washington (8-0), Bettendorf (8-0) and Linn-Mar (7-1) have already clinched their district titles. Pleasant Valley (5-3) and Iowa City West (5-3) are meeting for their district title this week, so one of them will be the district champ with a 6-3 record.

Tharp does not want to match Washington against Bettendorf in the quarterfinals - he'll want to wait until the semifinals, if they both advance - but who would Washington and Bettendorf meet in the quarterfinals?

Washington has already defeated Linn-Mar and Iowa City West this season, and Bettendorf has topped Pleasant Valley and Iowa City West. A rematch would be inevitable.

If the IHSAA sticks to geography, it would be Washington vs. Linn-Mar in the quarterfinals and Bettendorf against Pleasant Valley or Iowa City West. But you never know.

This is the first year for this kind of thing in Class 4A. Tharp said the IHSAA will review the entire process once the season is over, seek input from the coaches advisory committee and possibly make changes for next year.

Brave new world for football playoffs

Written by Jim Ecker

Sunday, 19 October 2014 18:47 - Last Updated Sunday, 19 October 2014 19:29

Meanwhile, the rest of us will have to be patient.

"This is unprecedented ground for us at the athletic association," Tharp acknowledged.

Washington and Bettendorf fans might think their teams should have a chance to play each other for the title, and the outcry could be deafening if there are upsets in the West that produce teams with two or three losses for the semifinals.

"I get what the public is going to be thinking. And I understand that aspect," said Tharp. "I'm not going to do it because there's an outcry from the public about it."

The first-round pairings will be announced this Friday night and they'll play those games on Wednesday, Oct. 29. When those games are over, the IHSAA will look at the remaining 16 teams in each class and announce the second-round games. And so forth.

Don't bother looking for a bracket on the IHSAA website this Friday night. You won't find one.

Bracketology in the prep football playoffs is dead.