

An NSAA proposal needs to see the light of day

Jay Slagle, PrepRunningNerd, May 13, 2020 (updated May 14, 2020)

An interesting and somewhat controversial revision to how Class A cross country districts are assigned has been winding its way through the NSAA hierarchy this past winter and spring. Late last fall, two Class A athletic directors initiated similar proposals to move Class A cross country from a two-site, four-district approach to a one-site, four-district approach. Unless momentum changes quickly, this change for the 2020 State meet may be finalized at a NSAA Board of Directors meeting on May 21.

Running nerds across the state are devoted to fairness, but legitimate questions have been raised about whether there's currently a problem with Class A XC district assignments – and, if there is, whether these proposals would actually fix it.

Towards the tail end of each cross country (after five full weeks of the nine-week competition season), the NSAA requires Class A coaches to submit the meet results that represent the two lowest average times of the team's top five finishers during competition that season. The results don't need to reflect the same five competitors; it's simply the first five finishers. The averages are then posted on the NSAA website (the Fall 2019 data has already been removed). For example, based on the Fall 2019 data, the Lincoln East girls had the fastest average time. Using these average times, all of the Class A girls teams were seeded from 1 through 32. The NSAA then uses a serpentine seeding system, that goes something like this:

District 1	District 2	District 3	District 4
Seed 1	Seed 2	Seed 3	Seed 4
Seed 8	Seed 7	Seed 6	Seed 5
Seed 9	Seed 10	Seed 11	Seed 12
Seed 16	Seed 15	Seed 14	Seed 13

The goal of the seeding system is to spread the best teams amongst the four districts so that, for example, we don't have four of the best teams in state assigned into one district when only three teams can advance to State.

For the last few years, the Districts have been assigned to two locations, so each location hosts two District meets (four races). The NSAA alternates between using girls' rankings and boys' ranking to assign locations, so in odd years the girls seedings are used, and in even years the boys seedings are used. So, for example, in an even year, if the District 1 and 2 meets were held at Pioneer's Park, and the Fremont boys were seeded 1st and assigned to District 1, that means the Fremont girls would also be assigned to Pioneer's Park – but their assignment to District 1 or 2 might be tweaked by the NSAA to ensure an equitable distribution of seeded teams between the two Districts. (There are two single-sex high schools in Class A, so Creighton Prep and Marian are treated as matched to the same site during the assignment process.) Under the current approach, the boys and girls teams are always assigned to the same location although they may race in different Districts.

Because the location assignments are based on one gender, there has been some concern that this results in an inequitable distribution of good teams among the four Districts. For example, in an odd-

numbered year when the girls seeding is used to assign locations, there is a perception that the approach can lead to worthy boys' teams being squeezed out a State berth. However, that doesn't seem to be a common problem.

Based on an analysis by a respected Class A coach, when the opposite gender seedings were used to assign District locations, only two teams (4%) ranked in the coaches' poll top 10 prior to Districts have failed to qualify for State over the last five years. This compares to 5 teams (10%) who didn't qualify during seasons when the District assignments were based on that gender's seedings.

I don't keep notes about why a particular ranked team didn't qualify, but I can speak to the most recent team that didn't – Creighton Prep. Prep returned three runners from their 2018 runner-up team, but in 2019 the top five pre-season runners battled injuries for most of the year. At Districts, three of their expected top-five runners did not compete, the fourth was hobbled by an injury that subsequently diagnosed as a stress fracture, and the fifth skipped the Metro meet the preceding week with a short-term injury. Prep's #10 ranking heading into Districts didn't reflect several of those injuries, and they narrowly lost a spot at State to two teams (Burke and Elkhorn South) that were running extraordinarily well. There are circumstances like this every year when pre-District expectations don't result in State berths.

Of course, 12 teams qualify for Class A state, and the analysis above only contemplated the 10 ranked teams prior to Districts. The coaches' rankings don't go beyond ten teams, and often less than 15 of the 33 Class A coaches participate in the poll. On the flip side, the seeding system used by the NSAA also has flaws. There are clearly a few 'fast' courses that could help improve seedings – Sioux Falls, Fremont and Walnut Grove come to mind. There are also imprecise distances (e.g., the short Heartland Classic a few years ago) and wide swings in weather that make cross country times far less comparable than track times. However, those are minor issues when you look at this entire rule-changing process.

In the NSAA decision making process, the two Class A athletic director proposals were first reviewed at one of six District meetings attended by athletic directors last November. The first proposal was advanced 20-8 out of District 2, a District that includes all of the Omaha-area Class A schools and 50 schools from outside of Class A. The second proposal was advanced out of the District 3 meeting by a vote of 28-0 with 18 abstentions. Norfolk appears to be the only Class A school in District 3.

Since both proposals passed in one District, they were then included a package of 50 proposals to be considered by all six Districts in January. The NSAA minutes from the January meetings are a bit difficult to interpret, but these seem to be the results of the votes at those meetings:

District	Class A schools represented	Proposal 1	Proposal 2
1	Lincoln-area schools	5-2-40	7-0-40
2	Omaha-area schools, Fremont, Columbus	Unclear	Unclear
3	Norfolk	1-19-31	26-3-22
4	Grand Island, Kearney, North Platte	3-10-72	8-5-74
5	None	1-4-17	1-4-17
6	None	12-6-7	11-5-9

After the January District meetings, there appear to be two routes for proposals that were approved by at least three Districts. Nine of the 50 proposals were considered 'Constitution/Bylaw' proposals by the NSAA, and five proposals received approval by at least three Districts. Those five proposals were advanced to the Representative Assembly, where approximately 50 athletic directors (including 13 representatives from Class A schools) will meet on May 21 to vote on whether to accept one of these proposals.

The cross country proposals were 2 of 41 proposals that are considered NSAA 'Approved Rulings' that, if approved by three or more Districts, are advanced to the NSAA Board of Directors for a vote. The NSAA Board of Directors has eight members, including two who represent Class A schools. The Board of Directors meeting is scheduled for May 21. The NSAA published the Board of Directors' agenda on May 14, but it does not list the specific proposals to be reviewed. However, in my exchange with a NSAA representative, it appears that the one or both proposals will be discussed.

There is also a third route for legislation that bypasses the District meetings. The Class Caucus system allows some changes to be voted upon only by members of the affected Class (in this instance, Class A), subject to some level of NSAA oversight. It's unclear why these proposals weren't submitted for review by the Class A Caucus.

I honestly don't know if either proposal is an improvement over the current system; they may actually be better than what we have now. However, I do have a few concerns:

- One of the highlights of the State is having all of the top teams in Nebraska compete in one location. If Class A moves to a single-site District arrangement, does that take away the luster of the State meet? How many potential District sites can accommodate 66 teams competing in eight races over four hours?
- In terms of inequities in cross country, is this the most pressing one? Since Class B, C and D districts are largely assigned by geography, I'd have greater concern for, say, a group of Class D schools that are always assigned to the same district with traditional powerhouse teams.
- Does the current NSAA voting process make sense when a proposal affects only one competition Class, but it requires significant votes from non-affected Classes in order to advance to the Representative Assembly? In situations like this, should proposals be required to be initially vetted by the affected Class Caucus even if the changes are so significant that wider approval was necessary?
- With 50 proposals to be reviewed (go to www.nhsaahome.org, then the 'Committees & Legislation' tab, and then click on the plus sign next to 'District Meetings' to see the January District agenda), and with a grand total of four Class A schools in Districts 3, 4, 5 and 6, how much discussion could have been devoted to the relative merits of either proposal at those District meetings?

- This seems like a rather major change to make so quickly, and it's unclear how much input has been afforded to Class A cross country coaches. With 50 proposals on the docket for the January meetings, did each Class A athletic director have the time to fully explore the proposals with her or her coaches? Was any consideration given to exploring how this might impact the State meet?
- One of the two proposals – and the proposal that appears to have gained the most support – was submitted by the Norfolk athletic director. When the NSAA considered moving the State XC meet from Kearney, Norfolk and Papio South were the two bidders for an alternative site. Papio South has recently indicated that they have no interest in hosting a one-site District meet, so Norfolk may be one of the few facilities – and perhaps the only one -in the state that can accommodate 66 teams and fans for 8 races. Is there a conflict of interest when the school proposing the move to a one-site District is also on the short list of schools to host such an event?

At the end of the day, athletic directors are charged with looking out for their athletes, and they do it well. However, in this instance it seems that the proposals and the decision-making process should be subjected to more scrutiny before they are adopted. It's unclear if either of the two proposals will be on the May 21 NSAA Board of Directors agenda, but if they are, they certainly deserve to see more light of day before a final vote.

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