



NCAA DIVISION II REGIONALIZATION WORKING GROUP

*Progress report to the Division II Championships Committee
and the Division II Management Council
on methods to mitigate conference matchups
in the first round of NCAA championships*

Spring 2017

Introduction

After legislation to amend the Division II championship selection criteria was adopted at the 2015 NCAA Convention, the Division II Championships Committee continued to receive feedback from the membership regarding challenges associated with current bracketing procedures in team sports. In particular, administrators, coaches and student-athletes were concerned about the frequency in which conference teams that have faced each other multiple times during the regular season and in conference tournament play were paired to square off yet again in the first round of the NCAA championship.

Research from the last five years of championships in many team sports shows that conference matchups in the first round occur on average about 25-30 percent of the time. Sport committees do the best they can to avoid such matchups, but existing Division II regionalization policies often tie their hands.

Similar concerns regarding conference matchups had already emerged in responses from the 2013 Division II Membership Census. Importantly, while there was no interest in modifying the core Division II principle of regionalization, there was a desire to explore whether bracketing policies could be more flexibly applied to avoid conference matchups and thus protect/enhance the NCAA championship experience for student-athletes.

The Division II Championships Committee worked with Division II sport committees throughout the 2015-16 academic year to develop potential solutions, but the issue proved to be one that demanded a more focused approach. Accordingly, the Championships Committee suggested in September 2016 that a working group of subject matter experts be formed to explore the issue and develop recommendations. The Division II Management Council approved the recommendation in October 2016 and the working group was appointed shortly thereafter.

Working Group Charge

From the outset, the working group was charged only with considering ways to amend current bracketing procedures to minimize instances in which teams face a conference opponent in the first round of an NCAA championship.

The scope was limited in that regard, yet reaction from some within the membership upon hearing that a working group had been appointed to study regionalization was that the group would “go rogue” and recommend changes to existing regional alignments, contiguous state principles, or even the selection criteria themselves.

On the contrary, the working group is focused solely on reducing instances in which conference opponents meet in the first round of the championship. Reaching a Division II championship is among the pinnacle moments for student-athletes. Conference rematches can deflate that experience. In multiple meetings with coaches, administrators and student-athletes who are asked to provide input on the championships experience, the conference matchup issue consistently emerges as the No. 1 concern.

Working Group Roster

Voting Members

- **Clyde Doughty**, director of athletics; Bowie State University
- **Shawn Jones**, director of athletics; Henderson State University
- **Steve Murray**, commissioner; Pennsylvania State Athletic Conference
- **Fran Reidy**, director of athletics; Saint Leo University, chair
- **Herb Reinhard**, director of athletics; Valdosta State University
- **Suzanne Sanregret**, director of athletics; Michigan Technological University
- **Tom Shirley**, assistant vice president of athletics/head women’s basketball coach; Philadelphia University
- **Karen Stromme**, associate director of athletics/senior woman administrator; University of Minnesota Duluth
- **Brian Swanson**, director of athletics; California Polytechnic State University, Pomona
- **Lisa Sweany**, director of athletics; Armstrong State University

Ex Officio Members

- **Tonya Charland**, associate commissioner/senior woman administrator; Great Lakes Valley Conference (Management Council vice chair)
- **Ty Dennis**, football student-athlete; University of Minnesota Duluth (Division II SAAC representative)
- **Gary Gray**, director of athletics; University of Alaska Fairbanks (Management Council chair)
- **Jim Johnson**, director of athletics; Pittsburg State University (Championships Committee chair)

What is ‘Regionalization’ Anyway?

The Division II philosophy statement (as legislated in Division II Bylaw 20.10) supports a regionalization model in scheduling that reduces time away from campus and keeps athletics participation in perspective within the educational mission. This is a core principle for the division that has stood the test of time. The regional approach helps define Division II, and it contributes to the division’s uniqueness within the NCAA.

From a championships perspective, the idea of regionalization requires sport committees to select a predetermined number of teams in each of the regions of the sports involved. This policy is based on an assumption that due to the regional nature of most Division II schools, sport committees should evaluate and select championship participants based on regional results as opposed to a national evaluation in which head-to-head and common opponents’ results are less prevalent.

The Division II regionalization philosophy provides access to national championships from every region of the country. Regionalization does not guarantee that the “best” eight programs in the country will compete for a national championship, but it does guarantee that the different regions of the country will be represented at the championship by each region’s best team as determined in competition.

In addition, regionalization encourages member schools to compete against opponents within their region, instead of seeking contests against opponents outside the geographical region. This scheduling incentive is aimed at helping schools manage their regular-season travel budgets and limit missed class time for Division II student-athletes.

More Parameters for Review

While the scope of the working group’s charge is limited, the scope of ideas is not. Working group members sought suggestions from sport committees, conference commissioners and other membership groups to inform their work, noting that all concepts would be considered.

The working group met in person for the first time on January 20 in conjunction with the NCAA Convention and then again on February 13 at the NCAA national office to begin its work in earnest.

The group agreed to consider ideas with the understanding that any recommended solution must align with the Division II regionalization philosophy, and must be fiscally responsible. Those two benchmarks would winnow the solutions that could ultimately be recommended, but the working group agreed to consider all suggestions on their merit first.

Identifying the Most-Affected Sports

Initial discussions quickly revealed that a “one size fits all” approach would not be appropriate for all sports.

Individual/team sports such as golf, swimming and diving, wrestling, cross country, and track and field, for example, do not experience the conference matchup issue. Not every team sport fits this mold either.

Football, for example, has a smaller bracket, and teams play single games each week to advance in the championship. The conference matchups in the first round remains somewhat of an issue in football (only two conference matchups have occurred in the last five years), but the Division II Football Committee is already considering a model that would cluster teams in the four regions in a way that is geographically feasible and would mitigate conference matchups.

Other sports are unique as well. In tennis, teams are selected via access ratios and bracketed the same way as in other sports, but two representatives from each region advance to the finals. Field hockey employs only a six-team bracket, and that committee is seeking to cross regions at the semifinals to alleviate the conference matchup issue. Similarly, men's lacrosse has a smaller bracket and fewer regions.

Men's soccer because of its 48-team bracket also is unique, and in the end the working group did not believe the conference matchup issue significantly affected that sport, though men's soccer could opt to be included in whatever the working group eventually recommends.

Ultimately, the working group determined that the conference matchup issue could be best managed in team sports that have larger brackets and regionals with multiple teams at one site. As such, the following sports attracted the bulk of the working group's attention:

- Baseball
- Men's Basketball
- Women's Basketball
- Women's Lacrosse
- Women's Soccer
- Softball
- Women's Volleyball

Models Initially Considered

The working group considered all comers in this regard, and the membership was invited to contribute. Group members sought input from their conferences and colleagues, as well as from other governance groups, including the Division II Student-Athlete Advisory Committee.

By the time the working group met in February, the ideas that had been gathered ranged from a crossover model to overhauling regionals altogether. Nothing was considered too "out of the box." The group spent significant time in fact discussing a model that would incorporate conference tournaments into the NCAA championship as the preliminary rounds, thus eliminating the existing regional concept and essentially giving the 24 conferences the autonomy to determine their representative into the finals field. The idea was eventually scrapped, but the working group took it seriously.

Some of the models came with greater budgetary impact, and the working group was more inclined to support models that would be cost-neutral or potentially result in cost savings (for example, ideas that resulted in teams in closer geographic proximity playing one another).

Among the concepts to garner the most favorable support initially included:

- A **regional crossover model**, in which geographically proximate regions would be paired and various seeds swapped to avoid conference matchups. After selections, half of the teams in one region would be switched with half of the teams from the second region and combined into one bracket. For example, the first, third, fifth and seventh seeds from one region could be combined with the second, fourth, sixth and eighth seeds from the second region to develop one bracket.
 - **Pros:** This model would virtually ensure that a team is never paired with a conference opponent in the first round.
 - **Cons:** It does not guarantee that each region would be represented at the finals site. In addition, NCAA staff applied the model as a hypothetical for the 2015 brackets in men's and women's basketball and women's volleyball and discovered a significant increase in travel costs (about \$500,000 - \$600,000).

- A **super region model**, in which existing regions would be combined into "super regions." Variations of this model include seeding all 16 teams in each super region, or perhaps seeding the top two to four seeds and then pairing the remaining seeds geographically.
 - **Pros:** The model would provide sport committees significant flexibility to avoid conference matchups.
 - **Cons:** It leans toward a "national" bracket, which conflicts with Division II's regional philosophy, and may have cost implications.

- A **reseeding model**, in which sport committees would be permitted to review the bracket and adjust opponents to avoid first-round matchups between two members of the same conference. In this model, the No. 1 seed could not be adjusted, which would preserve hosting opportunities and other benefits associated with being the top seed.
 - **Pros:** The concept is cost-neutral and, when applied to previous brackets, it was shown to be effective in reducing the number of conference matchups.
 - **Cons:** It doesn't eliminate the conference matchup issue. Also, as an unintended outcome, reseeding could actually disadvantage a higher seed (a No. 2 or No. 3 seed, for example), by pairing them with a tougher opponent in order to avoid a conference matchup.

The working group also considered "no change" as an option, realizing that any review of this nature must include retaining the status quo as an alternative. However, the group

quickly agreed that it wasn't a viable option given the consistent membership concern regarding conference matchups.

Mitigating Factors

As with any review of this nature, a number of complex questions and nuances complicated the group's deliberations. After all, if the conference matchup issue were easy to resolve, it wouldn't require a specialized working group to do so.

Two pause-points consistently emerged. One of course was whether whatever model being considered met the regionalization philosophy test and did not compromise the division's core principles. Second, though, was whether the models maintained the integrity of the bracket.

While the phrase "integrity of the bracket" may apply differently to different people, for the working group it meant maintaining fiscal responsibility and competitive equity.

Meeting the Test

- Does the model satisfy Division II's regionalization philosophy?
- Does it compromise competitive equity?
- Can the model be consistently applied?
- Is it fiscally responsible?

As such, the group had to weigh the scope of the concern against the ramifications a change might prompt. For example, while the membership has made it clear it doesn't like conference matchups, would that concern be mitigated in the face of a higher seed having to face a tougher opponent? In other words, would a coach rather improve his or her chances of winning by facing a conference foe perceived to be easier, rather than a more difficult opponent generated by swapping seeds?

Also, to what extent should sport committees be required to avoid conference matchups? If reseeding were to be provided as a tool, would that prompt some sport committees to apply it differently than others? Even within regions, could adjusting one pairing have different ramifications than another? Plus, in some regions in some sports where as many as five or six teams are selected from one conference, which of those inevitable matchups are switched and which aren't?

And finally, how important is the conference matchup issue compared with other aspects of the Division II championships program? In other words, if a model were adopted that had a budgetary impact, could those dollars be better served toward some other issue (bracket expansion, increased per diem, increased officials' fees, etc.)?

Those were among the most difficult sticking points the working group faced, and why the issue is so complicated. However, in keeping with the Division II Strategic Plan and the Division II regionalization philosophy, the working group did well to balance all of these factors during its review.

The Recommendation

Ultimately the working group settled on a proposed model with several embedded principles, but also with a few unanswered questions.

The recommendation is a version of the reseeding model noted earlier. It includes the following base assumptions:

- Sport committees will be allowed to reseed teams once the bracket is established in order to reduce the frequency of conference matchups.
- Regional advisory committees and national sport committees will conduct their normal ranking/seeding procedures based upon the selection criteria as defined for the sport, including placing automatic qualifiers (earned access) in the seeded order. However, because avoiding conference matchups is a priority, there will be differences between the final ranking and the final seeding in the bracket.
- The No. 1 seed in each region should never be disadvantaged in the reseeding process.
- Reseeding should not cause host sites to be altered.

While those are the base assumptions, some of the details remain to be determined. For instance:

- (1) Should only the No. 1 seed be protected in this scenario, or should the No. 2 seed in each region also receive similar protection?
- (2) Which seed lines are allowed to be adjusted – the 3 through 7 seeds, or something else?
- (3) To what extent is reseeding a requirement?

In working group discussions, applying this model showed to reduce conference matchups in previous years' brackets by at least half in almost all instances. The proposal also has no cost ramifications, as sport committees would still be encouraged not to pair teams in a manner that would cause additional flights.

As to the extent to which reseeding would be required, the Division II Championships Committee would have the final say, though the working group is leaning toward making it a requirement so that it is applied consistently. This would result in a slight values shift for the division in placing highest priority on avoiding first-round conference matchups.

The working group agreed that if the Division II Championships Committee voted against the reseeding model, that the “no change” option be favored over something more dramatic.

Next Steps

The working group will seek feedback on its recommendation from conferences, sport committees and other governance groups this spring and early summer in order to answer the remaining questions. The Division II Championships Committee next meets in person in late June and will deliberate the matter further at that time (the Championships Committee also conducts regularly scheduled teleconferences in the intervening period and can address the matter during those calls as well).

If the Championships Committee supports the recommendation, the Division II Management Council and Division II Presidents Council would need to approve it, likely during their summer meetings.

Pending those results, a reseeding model could be in effect as early as the 2017-18 academic year.