

NCHSAA football playoff system remains flawed

By Tim Hower StarNews Staff

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Despite winning a school-record eight games, Trask left out of the postseason

It looks like the N.C. High School Athletic Association will be going back to the drawing board. Again.

Saturday's reveal of its football playoff brackets proved the latest system is far from the best option. Nobody knew how the pilot program of using MaxPreps rankings to select and seed teams was going to turn out. We do now, and it isn't good.

There are many flaws, but the biggest is that winning is clearly not as important as strength of schedule. It's embarrassing -- and flat out wrong -- that 8-3 Trask won't be on the field Friday, while 27 other 2A teams with fewer wins will.

Other than four nonconference games, Trask coach Jonathan Taylor had no say in this year's schedule. The NCHSAA dictates which conference schools are members of, and MaxPreps penalizes teams that play in weak ones.

Lejeune (0-11), Dixon (2-9), Croatan (4-7) and Pender (4-7) are far from powerhouses. They were, however, on Trask's schedule and the Titans took care of business against all of them.

"There were teams that were rewarded for playing who MaxPreps deemed as more quality opponents than we had in our conference," Taylor said. "They told us we were the last team out. This is not the NCAA Tournament. I don't get any solace from them saying we were the last team out. I don't care about that."

I don't have the answers, and I'm realistic enough to know there isn't a perfect system out there. What I do know is that Trask, which played for a share of the conference title last week, should be in and 1-10 South Caldwell should not be the No. 2 seed with a bye in the 4A West bracket.

The reason South Caldwell got rewarded is because it beat the only other 4A team in the split Northwestern Conference.

That shouldn't guarantee the Spartans a postseason berth. The best teams should get the best seeds, regardless of their finish in conference play.

Take Friday's battle in Wake Forest as an example. A pair of 10-0 teams ranked in the top 3 in the state -- Wake Forest and Heritage -- faced off for the Northern 4A Conference title.

Wake Forest won 38-14 and rightfully earned the top seed in the 4AA East bracket.

Heritage, now the second-place team in the league, was seeded sixth in 4A East behind conference champions Overhills (8-3) and South Central (9-2). I would favor the Huskies by three-plus touchdowns against both of those teams.

If MaxPreps rankings are going to continue to be used, there needs to be some adjustments. Strength of schedule clearly can't be such a big factor and a minimum win percentage needs to be put in place for each classification.

I've also always been a believer in keeping at least first round matchups more regional. I see no reason why any team should have to travel more than two hours for an opening round game.

South Stanly will travel 275 miles (4 hours, 52 minutes according to MapQuest) one way to play at Murphy in the 1AA West bracket. North Wilkes has to drive 239 miles (3 hours, 53 minutes) one way to play at Whiteville in 2A West action.

It's too late to fix this year's problems, which is a shame for all the Trask seniors. We can only hope the NCHSAA realizes what a disaster this system is and goes back to trying to find a suitable replacement.

-- Reporter Tim Hower can be reached at 910-343-2366 or

Tim.Hower@StarNewsOnline.com



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**PHOTOS: High School Football
Week 12**

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