

Santucci: Want to improve the FHSAA's RPI system? Don't give district champs a top-4 seed

The postseason football brackets are out, but they just don't look quite right.

I offer two suggestions, just some minor changes to make sure the brackets are a more accurate reflection of what happened during the regular season.

First, give district champions an automatic playoff berth — just not a top-four seed. Second, alter the RPI formula to make strength of schedule a bigger factor.



Under the current format, the No. 4 vs. No. 5 game pits the district champion with the lowest RPI against the No. 1 at-large team. Go ahead and check out the brackets in Class 5A-8A. In many cases, the No. 4

vs. No. 5 game is a mismatch in the lower seeds favor. In theory, it should be the most even game, not one of the most lopsided.

If all districts were created equal, the current format would be fine. But they're not. Some districts are considerably more difficult than others. It's not an insult, just a reality. In some cases, teams that don't even finish in the top eight in the RPI are vaulting up to the No. 4 seed because they won a district championship.

Tweak, don't overhaul

I'm not in favor of abandoning the districts. Some coaches and media prefer the whole state look like 1A-4A, where there are no districts, only regions, and the top six teams advance to the playoffs. It's simple. But it's not perfect.

For perennial playoff teams who view the district championship as their birthright, winning that crown may not be that big of a deal.

But consider the case of Port St. Lucie, which won its first district championship since 1990. The Jaguars erased 31 years of misery in late October. It's arguably the biggest game the program has had in three decades.

That week of school, those four days of practice, the feeling in the locker room before the game, the emotion at kickoff, the elation of winning a trophy and knowing they were in the playoffs. That will stay with those players and coaches for the rest of their lives.

Ending the districts would eliminate all of that. Is that really the best idea? I don't think so. But automatically giving every district champion a top-four seed isn't the answer either.

All RPI seedings

So what do you do? The four district champions automatically earn a playoff spot, but the seeding would be completely determined by the RPI.

Lakeland went 9-1 with the highest RPI in Region 2-7A but it is the No. 5 seed in the region because the one game it lost was to district rival Lake Gibson. That doesn't make any sense. It means that a handful of district games is more important than the full body of work. That shouldn't be.

Or use a very deep Region 1-8A as an example, where two district runners-up are in the top five and District 4 champion Timber Creek is eighth.

Here's the current bracket in Region 1-8A: (1) Seminole vs. (8) Winter Park, (4) Timber Creek vs. (5) Lake Mary, (3) Apopka vs. (6) Creekside, (2) Bartram Trail vs. (7) Lake Brantley.

Here's how it would look if the district champions weren't guaranteed a top four seed: (1) Seminole vs. (8) Timber Creek, (4) Apopka vs. (5) Creekside, (3) Bartram Trail vs. (6) Lake Brantley, (2) Lake Mary vs. (7) Winter Park.

Two of the pairings are the same, but the potential second-round games are completely different. In this scenario, the No. 1 and No. 2 RPI seeds wouldn't meet until the regional final. Under the current format, they'll meet in the semifinal. It shouldn't be that way.

Changing the math

As for RPI formula, the current model is 35 percent is winning percentage, 35 percent is opponent's winning percentage and 30 percent is opponent's opponent's winning percentage.

Several issues. First, too many teams who won a lot of games but didn't really challenge themselves are seeded higher than teams who lost a couple games but played a high level of competition. As bizarre as it sounds, a team's winning percentage matters just a little too much. (Yes, I wrote that and I just read it back. It looks weird, but it's the right sentiment. Just stay with me.)

Second, the opponent's opponent's winning percentage is too big a factor. Are coaches supposed to start making their schedule by asking who their opponent's opponents plan to schedule? Does that even make sense? So it's not enough to play a hard schedule, now you have to hope that the other teams they played also played — and beat — good teams. I'm not saying it shouldn't be a factor in determining strength of schedule, but a third is too high.

So here's the changes I would make: 30 percent winning percentage, 50 percent opponent's winning percentage and 20 percent opponent's opponent's winning percentage.

Why should strength of schedule matter more than winning? Because it would prevent teams from trying to pad their schedule but avoid playing anyone good.

If you want a high seed in the playoffs, you should have to earn it.

Don't misunderstand, this isn't an attack on the Florida High School Athletic Association or the RPI system. I believe the FHSAA is doing a better job of getting the best matchups in the postseason and the

decision to reseed the Final Four is a great decision. The RPI — a system I initially was resistant to embrace — is working.

For the most part.

But that doesn't mean the system couldn't use some tweaks.

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