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The North Carolina High School Athletic Association will use a pod system concerning the state football playoffs this season. Qualifying teams will be placed in eight brackets and split into an east and west region. Those regions will then be broken up into an east, west, midwest and mideast region. There will be 16 teams in each bracket.

The idea of the pod system to cut travel costs and prevent teams, as was the case in past years, to travel halfway across the state for a first-round playoff game. All the teams will be seeded and will be placed in each pod based on geographical location.

The Watauga High football team traveled to Ragsdale for a first-round playoff game last fall. Under this system, if it was in existence last season, WHS would have been placed in the West pod with the likes of A.C. Reynolds, Alexander Central, T.C. Roberson, Sun Valley, Porter Ridge, Mount Tabor and East Gaston. And to reduce travel, the Pioneers would have most-likely opened the state playoffs in Taylorsville against Alexander Central.

And there could be a senario where the top three teams or more from a region could end up in the same pod. The podding system will also determine the playoff pairings through the first three rounds.

Qualifying teams will be arranged within a class based on enrollment. A field of 64 teams will be selected with the larger schools placed in the AA division; the smaller schools will be place in the A division per classification (from 1A-4A).

The regional finals will be hosted by the higher seeded team. Ten head football coaches, representing each classification and region of the state, worked with the NCHSAA staff to develop the procedure.

“We tried to think of all the possibilities,” said Que Tucker, the deputy NCHSAA commissioner. “It is an involved process, but you just take it step by step.”

The Pioneers will begin fall practice on Monday, August 2. The season opener will be Friday, August 20 at the newly-built Jack Groce Stadium against Ashe County. The state playoffs begin with first-round games on Friday, November 12.