The Women's DI College playoffs begin Friday, and the 16 teams are heading to three different sites to determine which four teams head to Palo Alto, Calif., for the semifinals. Pool A contests its matches in Buffalo, N.Y., where the national finalists from the last six years will likely see each other in the quarterfinals on Saturday.

Defending champion Penn State and Stanford, two teams that the collegiate championships are so used to seeing in the final match, will likely play each other much earlier in the tournament than accustomed.

The two teams have three titles apiece over the last six years, with Penn State dominating in recent memory. But since Stanford finished second at the Pacific Coast Championship to BYU and the #8 seed overall, the team's road to final became a lot more difficult.

"It seems like it wouldn't be a rugby season without our perennial match-up," Stanford captain Frances Wehrein said. "I have an incredible amount of respect for Penn State. They will certainly challenge us, but I believe it could potentially be the game of the season of us. Although we typically meet in the National Championship, I think it's good not only for collegiate women's rugby but for our program as well to meet at a different time."

But the teams can't afford to look past their first-round matches before focusing on what will be their toughest games thus far this season. On Friday, Stanford will have to get past Dartmouth (Northeast #3), and Penn State will have to beat Northern Iowa (Midwest #2). Both of the lower seeds have struggled at the last couple of national championships, unable to advance past the first round.

That's not to say that UNI and Dartmouth aren't looking for an upset.

"The team looks good, although we have some kids that are dinged up from two weeks ago," UNI coach Steve Murra said. "Our practices have been dedicated to our game plan in the opening round [against Penn State]. The team is really focused and excited about the opportunity to represent our school on the national level."

UNI is a young team, with only four seniors and 12 freshmen comprising the squad of 30. The Panthers will be relying on California native Jacki Bercovici, as well as freshmen Becca Brown and Karless West. Penn State has a lot of young talent as well, but they'll be bolstered by players with national-level experience, including Sadie Anderson, Lisa Henneman, Christiane Pheil and Deven Oswiany.

Dartmouth has been doing its homework on Stanford, and is confident they put forth a good game Friday. The team has been analyzing the Cardinal's film and working diligently on team defense.

"We think we can contain their threats and even out-match them in a couple of areas," Dartmouth coach Deb Archambault said. "The small surface which we will now be playing on - weather condition have moved the game to a 54 x 91 meter turf field - will be a mixed bag for both our teams. It will curtail Stanford's kicking game somewhat, but it will also limit our outside running game, which has been a staple for us this spring."

Dartmouth is also a young team, and will by relying on its less experienced players due to some unfortunate injuries to starters. The team tuned up against Norwich at 10 a.m. last weekend in the cold rain, and is familiar with what Friday's weather may bring. It'll be difficult, however, for Dartmouth to be prepared for Stanford's firepower, notably in standouts Wehrein, Amelia Villines, Jamie Lawrence and Alex Wolens.

"The challenge for us has continually been playing to the standard we set for ourselves," Wehrein said. "So in terms of Dartmouth we're looking to focus on the quality of game we've been able to play for the entire 80 minutes."

Should the Round of 16 pan out as expected, then that will set up the quarterfinal match of the tournament on Saturday: Stanford v Penn State. Penn State has had the edge the past couple of years, and they're the favorite heading into this game. But Stanford is maximizing its chances and already in Buffalo preparing for the weekend.

"It's challenging us early to pull together," Wehrein looked ahead to their potential quarterfinal against PSU. "I think both programs truly enjoy the competition we provide each other, and I'm sure it's going to be an intense, closely fought game."

Read more about Pool B , Pool C and Pool D .

Pool ARound of 16 – Buffalo, NY

Friday

Game 1 - 10 a.m.: Stanford v Dartmouth

Game 2 - 10 a.m.: Penn State v Northern Iowa

Saturday

Consolation Quarterfinals

Game 3 - 10 a.m.: Loser Game 1 v Loser Game 2

Quarterfinals

Game 4 - 12 p.m.: Winner Game 1 v Winner Game 2