



Travel Baseball: The Ultimate Guide for Parents and Players

For many families, the transition from Little League to travel baseball comes with stress, anxiety and questions about what to look for in a team and what to expect from the experience — not to mention the question of whether making the switch from a more laid-back rec ball program to a more competitive (and expensive) travel club is the right decision in the first place.

In this post, we're going to go over everything you need to know about getting started with youth travel baseball. We'll help you answer the questions above and determine whether travel baseball is a good fit for your son or daughter.

If you have a softball player in the family, you may also want to check out our article "[What to Look For in a Travel Softball Team](#)," which covers some of the same information from a softball perspective and dives deep into my personal experience as an elite-level amateur player and college recruiting prospect.

What is Travel Baseball?

First, it's important to understand what a travel baseball team is and how travel baseball is organized.

There are tens of thousands of travel baseball teams around the country, and their popularity has exploded over the past two decades. As recently as the 1990s, travel baseball was a niche experience limited mostly to elite players in baseball-rich areas like Texas and California. Today, participation is seen by many as a near necessity for talented players to develop their skills and hone their game against the best competition they can find.

Whereas Little League is the dominant organization when it comes to recreational youth baseball, there are multiple organizations throughout the country that host hundreds of travel tournaments each year. Some of the biggest and most popular are [USSSA](#) (United States Speciality Sports Association), [AAU](#) (Amateur Athletic Union), [Triple Crown Sports](#), and [Perfect Game](#). Travel baseball teams often participate in tournaments organized by more than one of those organizations.

A team can be started by anyone. Many are formed by parents, but many others are formed by high school and former college coaches. Depending on their organizational goals, some programs have just one team that participates in one age bracket (such as 10 and under), while some are run like businesses and have teams that compete in every age group.

Some huge organizations, such as [California Baseball Academy](#) (CBA), even have multiple teams within the same age group, located in multiple cities. CBA has teams not only in California, but also in Nevada, Texas, Utah and the southeast. High-level programs like that are often known for attracting top talent, for training recruits into elite players, and for feeding those players into nearby colleges and universities.

Travel Baseball Competition Structure

Virtually all travel baseball games are played on weekends in a tournament format. Those tournaments can theoretically be held anywhere, but are frequently held at multi-field facilities in easily-accessible travel hubs. For example, many Florida tournaments are held in Orlando because it's in the relative center of the state, it has plenty of hotel rooms, and it's home to many great baseball facilities. The farther you live away from such a hub, the more you should expect to travel.

Most tournaments begin with pool play, meaning that teams are guaranteed a number of games before heading into single elimination. A team can expect to play anywhere from three to eight games over the course of a two-day or three-day tournament, depending on how they perform.

There is no set number of tournaments a team must participate in. Each team decides which tournaments to enter on a case-by-case basis, taking into consideration factors such as age level, skill level, and cost. In general, two tournaments per month can be seen as about average, although higher-level teams may play more frequently.

Most organizations run regional and national championships, which are invite-only. For example, USSSA hosts "qualifier" tournaments, where the winner of the championship game (and sometimes the runner up) can earn a bid to the USSSA national tournament.

Additionally, beginning at age 14, some teams start participating in "college exposure tournaments," where college scouts come from across the country to watch and evaluate prospects. These tournaments are typically more expensive than regular tournaments, and are often farther away.

What to Look For in a Travel Baseball Team

Here are eight things to think about when evaluating teams. These factors will make a big difference when it comes to your overall experience, so take the time to think about them, and don't be afraid to ask questions of parents and coaches.

1. Coaching

A coaching staff can make or break a team. How coaches manage players, keep the game fun, instill the fundamentals, and focus on development — not only as athletes, but as young men and women — is extremely important.

Some travel baseball teams have parents or grandparents serving as the head coach. While that can be fine, it's important to make sure those coaches don't make keeping their own child on the field a priority. Before committing to a team, spend some time researching it by watching a practice and talking to current and/or former players and parents. Additionally, are players treated equitably, or do some get preferential treatment based on their relationship to the coach or their financial contribution to the team?

Ideally, your child will be a part of that team and organization for consecutive years, rather than bouncing from team to team. As such, determining whether the coaching staff is a good fit is a crucial first step.

2. Cost

For many parents, this is the most terrifying aspect of travel baseball.

Just how much of a toll is this going to take on your bank account? The specific answer varies, but the typical range of cost for participating in travel baseball is between \$500 and \$2,500 per year.

That said, you can end up spending *a lot* more than that. Back in 2011, CBS News reported that [one Georgia family paid \\$4,000 per year](#) for their 9-year-old

son's travel team. You can imagine that older players in elite programs that travel all over the country can spend even more over the course of a season.

Typically, the more intensely focused a program is on developing its players for college baseball, the more money the program is going to cost. On the other hand, teams that are playing more for the fun of it — those looking for just a little more structure and competition than offered by Little League — won't put as much of a dent in your wallet.

There are a number of specific factors that go into how much it costs to be on a team:

- **Where you live.** If you live in a baseball hub, like Texas or California, you won't have to travel as far to get to tournaments. Many teams from rural areas regularly drive across multiple states (or sometimes even fly) to tournaments. As such, where you live will likely be the single biggest variable in your overall travel baseball cost.
- **Whether you have to buy your own equipment.** Some teams are sponsored by equipment companies like Easton and Rawlings and have their bats, gloves and cleats provided either for free or at a reduced cost. Obviously, this can be a huge savings. Also, keep in mind that (unfortunately) equipment is often viewed as a status symbol in travel baseball. If your child joins a team where every other player has multiple bats and position-specific gloves, he or she is going to press you for similar gear.
- **Whether you have to rent facilities.** Some teams practice exclusively at public fields. Others have little or no access to such facilities and have to rent fields and/or indoor space (especially for winter workouts). This can have a huge impact on the overall cost of participation.
- **Whether or not coaches are paid.** Some teams — typically the more competitive ones — pay their coaches small stipends and/or cover their cost of travel. On one hand, this tends to lead to better coaching. On the other hand, families are the ones who will ultimately foot that bill.
- **How competitive the team is.** Higher-level tournaments typically have higher fees. Lower-level tournaments, operated on a more sub-regional basis, are usually much less expensive to enter. If cost is a concern, make sure you know what types of tournaments the team usually enters over the course of the season.

3. Location

As stated earlier, location is a key factor in deciding which travel team to play for.

If you're fortunate enough to live in California, Florida or Texas, you're going to

have a lot of opportunities to play with and against high-level competition right in your backyard.

But outside of those states, it's a little bit tougher, and you have to decide how committed you are to playing at the highest possible level.

For example, if you live in a medium-sized town outside of a major baseball hub, chances are you have at least a couple of travel ball options. However, the odds are that those options are not the absolute cream of the crop when it comes to coaching and competitiveness. In order to play for the absolute "best" team possible, you might have to commute from your mid-sized town to the nearest major city.

So you'll be faced with the following choice: play on a lower level team that's closer to home, or drive a hundred miles or more for twice-weekly practices? It may sound crazy, but many families do just that.

Why would they commit so much time and money to their son or daughter's athletic pursuits? It comes down to goals. Better teams often provide better coaching and more opportunities for exposure to college and professional scouts.

4. Mission

What's the team's mission? Is the focus on fun, player development, college exposure, or a mix of all there? Teams can have many different goals and missions, and there's no right or wrong approach.

However, it is possible that a team's mission does not align with your values and goals, and you need to think about this before committing, as a compatibility mismatch can lead to coach-parent and coach-player tension.

5. Organization

Consider the reputation of the organization you're evaluating. When you join a team, you and your son or daughter will essentially be endorsing everything the program stands for. If they're known for dirty play or being disrespectful to the game, you'll be associated with that.

And believe it or not, the baseball world is a small and surprisingly tight-knit community. College coaches tend to know which programs produce bad apples — and they avoid them. In fact, many college coaches will completely write off an entire organization that has a reputation for not playing the game the right way or for having disrespectful players.

6. Playing Time

There's an important balance between getting enough playing time and being challenged. Before committing, ask the coaching staff what kind of playing time your child can expect — including at what position.

If there are two returning shortstops, he or she most likely won't be playing there and might have to learn another position. That's not a bad thing: college coaches want players that are versatile, and many players change positions as they get older and their bodies develop.

Still, it's helpful to know what to expect ahead of time. Getting game reps is important from a development perspective, but also just from a *fun* perspective: no kid wants to consistently travel to a tournament only to sit on the bench for most of the weekend.

7. Skill Level

Be realistic about your child's skill level, and pay attention to the level of competition around him or her at tryouts (i.e., the skill levels of the other players). If your kid has the fight and desire to compete for a spot (like they'll have to do if

they make it to college ball), then putting them on a team where they'll be challenged is the best option.

But if he or she is there to have fun and make friends, with no burning desire to be constantly improving, then choosing a travel team that's more low-key will be the better call.

8. What You're Giving Up

Travel baseball tournaments are on weekends, and players often have to sacrifice certain things that are part of a normal childhood.

Is your son or daughter willing to miss out on things like birthdays, sleepovers and school dances, because most of their time is spent doing homework, traveling to and from games and practices, practicing on their own (possibly including private lessons), and spending nearly every summer weekend at the ballpark?

And are they willing to sacrifice the material things that matter to kids — things like clothes, video games, new smartphones, etc. — because so much money is being spent on baseball?

As I wrote in [THV's guide to travel softball](#), my family made major sacrifices to support my athletic pursuits.

For some, their love of the game is so great that giving up these things is a no-brainer. For others, they may regret missing out on these social activities. And that's perfectly fine! Just be honest with each other and talk about the true costs of travel baseball — because it's not just the sticker price.

Travel Baseball vs. Little League

There are some important similarities and differences between competitive travel baseball and recreational baseball. Both can teach many valuable life skills, such

as work ethic, good sportsmanship, teamwork and bouncing back from failure. But they are very different when it comes to time commitment and competitiveness.

The Little League schedule usually runs from the late spring through early summer, with teams practicing twice per week and playing two games per week. The total number of games per season varies, but it usually ranges from 10 to 20. It's a local program, which means travel is either limited or non-existent. In general, Little League coaches are parents.

Little League can be a great place for kids as young as 4-years-old to start playing the game. They'll learn the rules and the absolute basics of hitting, pitching and fielding in a fun and easy-going environment (except for the occasional parent that takes their coaching position overboard).

Overall, Little League fits the classic stereotype of youth baseball: kids having fun playing the greatest game in the world, without much pressure or focus on player development.

Back in the day, Little League would feed into middle school and high school programs, which carried the bulk of the weight when it came to getting players ready for college and the pros. But today, the reality is that it's almost impossible to get the coaching and skill development you need by participating only in Little League or other rec ball programs.

That's especially true when it comes to the gap between "Majors" Little League (12-and-under) and high school. Few middle schools still have baseball programs, and those programs that do exist tend not to be very good. Likewise, while Little League offers both a Junior division (12-14) and a Senior division (14-16), those leagues tend to pale in comparison to the coaching and competition offered by travel ball.

So, if your son or daughter is serious about playing baseball at a high level, it's especially important to focus on the transition to travel ball at around the age of 11 or 12.

What's the coaching style? Do they have high expectations but still encourage and love their players? Or, on the other hand, are they screaming at players when they make a mistake?