

TRAVEL SPORTS TRUTH

The Parent Guide

How to Read Any Club, In Any Sport

*“We don’t rank clubs.
We teach you to read them.”*

Why This Guide Exists

Most of what you'll read about youth travel sports comes from the people selling it to you — club websites, tournament organizers, recruiting services. None of them are lying exactly, but none of them are neutral either.

This guide isn't selling anything. We don't rank clubs. We don't rate coaches. We don't tell you which team to join.

What we do is teach you to read the landscape yourself — the real costs, how club tiers actually work, what coaching credentials do and don't mean, and how recruiting realistically plays out by sport. Once you can read it, you don't need someone else's opinion of which club is "the best." You can just look at any club, in any sport, and know what you're actually signing up for.

This guide draws on Travel Sports Truth's published research, plus firsthand insight from a contributor with 14 years of experience coaching competitive youth travel sports.

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What Travel Sports Actually Cost

The number on a club's registration page is rarely the number you'll actually spend.

According to the Aspen Institute's *State of Play 2025* report, youth sports costs have risen 46% since 2019 — well outpacing general inflation. The average family now spends over \$1,000 per child per year, and that's before factoring in travel, hotels, equipment, and tournament fees that registration pages don't mention upfront.

There's also a real participation gap tied to income: households earning over \$100,000 a year are roughly twice as likely to have a child in organized youth sports as households earning less. That's not a coincidence — it reflects how expensive this world has quietly become.

Before you sign anything, ask the club directly:

- What's the full season cost, including tournaments and travel — not just registration?
- Are hotel bookings required through a specific vendor, or can families book their own?
- Is there a minimum number of tournaments per season, and what's the average cost per tournament?
- What's NOT included in the registration fee that most families end up paying for anyway?

A club that answers these clearly, without hedging, is a good sign. A club that gets vague or defensive is information too.

How Club Structures Actually Work

Almost every club uses tier names — “Elite,” “Premier,” “Select,” “Gold,” “A-Team,” “B-Team.” None of these words are regulated. A club can call its lowest team “Elite” if it wants to. The label tells you nothing on its own.

Ask about the tier structure directly:

- How many teams does this club run at each age group, and how are players assigned to them?
- Do lower tiers get the same number of practices, same coaching attention, and same tournament schedule as the top tier — or significantly less?
- Is there a tryout or evaluation process for moving up, and how often does it happen?

Watch for the “B-Team Subsidization” pattern. Some clubs price their lower tiers close to their top tier — even though the lower team trains less, travels less, and gets less coaching attention. In effect, the lower-tier families are paying nearly full price to help cover the costs of the top team. This isn't illegal or even uncommon, but it's worth knowing whether you're funding someone else's experience, not just your own kid's.

A club that's transparent about how tiers actually work — practice hours, coaching ratios, real differences between teams — is showing you something useful. A club that just repeats marketing language (“Elite training experience!”) without specifics is telling you it doesn't want you to compare.

Coaching Credential Red Flags

Coaching credentials in youth travel sports are wildly inconsistent. Some governing bodies require real certification and background checks. Others require almost nothing beyond a registration fee.

After 14 years coaching competitive youth travel sports, here's what I'd tell any parent to actually check — not what a club's marketing page claims, but what's true underneath:

Ask specifically:

- What certification does this coach actually hold, from which governing body, and how recent is it?
- Has this coach passed a background check through the sport's official governing body — not just the club's own internal process?
- How long has this coach been with this specific club? High turnover at the top is often a sign of bigger problems underneath.
- Will my child have the same head coach all season, or does the club rotate coaches between teams?

A genuine red flag: a coach who has impressive-sounding titles (“Director of Player Development”) but can't point you to a specific certification or governing body when asked directly. Confident vagueness is the tell — credentialed coaches usually answer specifics quickly, because they're proud of the work it took to earn them.

This doesn't mean every uncertified coach is bad, or every certified coach is great. It means credentials are one data point, not the whole picture — and a club that gets uncomfortable when you ask is telling you something too.

The Recruiting Reality Check

One of the biggest myths in youth travel sports is that every sport works the same way when it comes to recruiting. It doesn't.

In some sports, high school programs barely register with college coaches — recruiting happens almost entirely through club and travel circuits. In others, high school performance is just as important, or even more important, than club play. Treating every sport the same way leads families to spend money in the wrong places.

For example: of the roughly 478,000 high school baseball players nationally, only about **8.8%** go on to play at any NCAA level — and that number includes Division I, II, and III combined, not just the top tier. Other sports have meaningfully different odds, and different recruiting pathways entirely.

Rather than guess, the right move is to check the specific pathway for your child's sport — how much high school play actually matters, versus how much is purely club-driven. We keep an up-to-date breakdown by sport on our site (Resources → College Exposure) so you can check the real picture for the sport your kid plays, rather than relying on a club's general claims about “exposure” and “looks.”

Ask any club directly:

- Realistically, how many players from this program have gone on to play at the college level in the last 3 years — and at what level (D1, D2, D3, NAIA)?
- Does this club track and share that information openly, or is it vague when asked?
- For this specific sport, does high school play matter to college recruiters, or is it mostly irrelevant?

A club that can answer with real names, years, and outcomes is showing you something real. A club that says “tons of our kids get recruited” without specifics is using the word the way a car lot uses “sale.”

The Diagnostic Checklist

Questions to ask any club, any sport. Print this. Bring it to your next conversation with a club. A good club will welcome these questions. A club that bristles at them is telling you something too.

COST

- ☐ What's the full season cost, including tournaments, travel, and gear — not just registration?
- ☐ Are hotel bookings required through a specific vendor, or can our family book independently?
- ☐ What's NOT included in the fee that most families end up paying for anyway?

TEAM STRUCTURE

- ☐ How many teams does this club run at our age group, and how are players assigned?
- ☐ Do lower tiers get meaningfully less coaching, practice time, or tournament exposure than the top team?
- ☐ How and when can a player move between tiers?

COACHING

- ☐ What certification does our child's coach hold, and from which governing body?
- ☐ Has this coach passed a background check through the sport's official governing body?
- ☐ How long has this coach been with this club? Has there been turnover at the top?

RECRUITING & OUTCOMES

- ☐ How many players from this program have gone on to play in college in the last 3 years, and at what level?
- ☐ For our specific sport, does high school play matter to college recruiters — or is it mostly irrelevant?

COMMITMENT

[] What's the actual weekly time commitment during season — practices, games, and travel combined?

[] Is multi-sport participation supported, or does this club expect single-sport commitment?

What to Do Next

You don't need to memorize all of this. You just need to ask the right questions before you sign anything — and now you know what they are.

A few practical next steps:

- **Run the numbers yourself.** Use our free True Cost Calculator at travelsportstruth.com to see a realistic full-season estimate for your child's sport, not just the registration fee.
- **Check the recruiting reality for your specific sport.** Visit Resources → College Exposure on our site for an up-to-date, sport-by-sport breakdown of how much high school play actually matters.
- **Bring the diagnostic checklist with you.** Print it, save it on your phone, whatever works — just have it in hand at your next club conversation.

We don't rank clubs, and we never will. But a parent who knows what to ask doesn't need a ranking. You'll be able to look at any club, in any sport, and know exactly what you're getting.

— Travel Sports Truth
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