



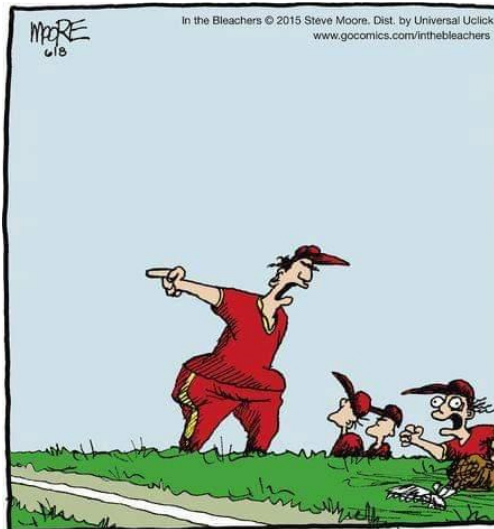
## Parent's Guide to Choosing a Travel-Ball Team

By Gene Frost, Executive Director

Utah State recently published a study that lists baseball as the third most expensive sport to play in America. The study also stated that more and more parents feel compelled to spend more money on their children's sports so they can "keep up with the Joneses." In another study published by The Aspen Institute, the percentage of children playing sports in America is declining! Having served as a coach for over 30 years, I have seen this decline firsthand. I have served as a high-school tennis coach, a college tennis coach, a private tennis instructor for 7 years, a private baseball instructor for 13 years and have coached over 500 baseball games. Through these experiences, I have seen the growing challenge of children staying engaged in sports. I have a saying in the baseball club, "no game is fun to play if you don't know how to play it." Its a simple statement, but very profound. If you don't know how to play a game well, you do not enjoy it and will eventually quit. These studies list the number one reason for athletes quitting sports is due to not having fun. Our children are facing many challenges today, technology being the biggest. Your child would rather text you in the same room than talk to you. Their ability to communicate with human beings verbally is diminishing and this affects their ability to perform in team sports due to the demand for good communication on a team. Other challenges are the cost to play and the ability to learn the game. If you have a child interested in becoming the best baseball player they can be, this article will be of benefit. My son fell into this category and I'd like to share some experiences as a parent and coach that will help you. Years ago, I developed the largest baseball travel-ball club in the state of Tennessee and my son became the top pitcher in the state so I want to share some insight on how to choose a travel-ball team.

I started a travel-ball team because after coaching rec-ball for four years, I realized the league did not provide me the opportunity to teach the game. All they want to do is play games. I remember one week when my son was 12 years old and due to rain-outs, we played five games in one week and had no practice. That same year, there were five coaches in the league that never played baseball. Why does every rec league have coaches that have never played baseball? I think its due to rec leagues disrespecting the game. Guys that played the game and know how to teach the game are not going to volunteer their time to be a babysitter and game coach. They want to give back to the game by teaching the game, but the leagues are not structured to do this.

I want to help you think about a few things when evaluating where your son should play baseball but before we dive in, it is very important for you to be brutally honest with yourself about your son's ability to play the game. We all tend to think more highly of our children and we also get in their way by pushing them or expecting them to do something they do not want to do. Parental expectations and pressures are a huge challenge for young athletes today so do your part and do not become part of the problem!



**"Take the field! ... And remember: Your parents are counting on you to achieve their unfulfilled dreams of sports glory!!"**

**What are your son's goals in baseball?** Its important to hear I asked about your son's goals, not your goals for your son. I have coached too many players who were on the field because mom or dad wanted them to, not because of the player's personal desire. Its never too late to have this discussion with your son. Ask him to write down his baseball goals and then review them with him. If goals include being with friends or having fun, you should choose the least expensive option for your son to play baseball. Why invest in something they are not serious about? Along those lines, I have also seen very talented ball players choose a team so they can play with friends, but the team did not provide player development. This stalled their growth as a player and led them to quit the game due to poor mechanics and fundamentals. If your son wants to excel as a player, you should discuss their personal abilities and talents and strongly encourage them to seek player development opportunities, not fun or relational opportunities. Assuming they want to excel as a ball player, player development must be your initial focus on choosing a team! Ironically, college coaches say the same thing.

**It is important to realize that playing the game, teaching the game, and coaching the game are three different skill sets!** Too often we choose a private instructor or a team coach because they played the game at a high level. When you do this, you are assuming they know how to teach the game or coach the game and most often this is not the case! To develop a skill requires experience, training and education. The US Baseball Club has regular coach's meetings to learn and grow as coaches. We are members of the American Baseball Coaches Association and pursue opportunities to learn and grow as coaches and teachers of the game. When hiring coaches for the Club, I look at coaching experience, not playing experience. I also look at their willingness and desire to learn. If they feel like they know it all or do not have room to learn, we are not interested in working with them. They must also know how to develop young men. Most school-ball coaches fail at these things! They are intimidated by anyone that might know more than them and often discourage their players from playing travel ball due to this insecurity. When choosing a team, choose a coach that makes evidence-based decisions. Choose a coach with the experience to teach AND coach the game. And its extremely

important they are of high character. College coaches are quick to mention that their biggest frustration is dealing with boys in college, not young men. Remember, the coach you choose is not a teammate! It does not matter the level of ball they played, you want a coach and teacher.



### **If you are focused on player development, how do you evaluate a coach?**

A focus on player development can easily be seen in player evaluations and on the practice field. Is there any instruction being given towards fundamentals and mechanics during player evaluations? If not, there's a problem. One of the most important traits the US Baseball Club desires in a player is coachability. Can the player take information, process it, and implement change? If they cannot do this, what you see is what you get. Their progress is going to be slow and if put on a team with players who are coachable, they most often get frustrated and frustrate their teammates. The best way to measure coachability on the field is provide players the opportunity to learn something new and see if they can implement it. If I hit your son ground balls or fly balls to measure how well they can field and throw, I have no measure of coachability. But if I notice they do not execute a backhand or do not leave a fly ball up after the catch and then provide them instruction and the opportunity to execute something new, now I can measure coachability. Most player evaluations are too shallow so intangibles like work ethic, attitude and coachability cannot be measured. If your son wants to play college ball, he must be coachable and he must get the proper instruction.

**How often does the team practice?** Practice makes perfect! Many travel teams do not practice at all while others treat practice as a necessary means to an end and that end is collecting a check from you. The US Baseball Club has developed unique practice regimens that contain drills proven to develop better fundamentals and mechanics. These drills change every 5-15 minutes throughout practice. The more your son knows, the more fun they have! If you are evaluating a coach, ask questions about their practices. Where does the team practice and how often? Knowing this allows you to determine whether you can commit to these times? Keep in mind this is an investment into your son so if you find the right team, its worth the drive to practice!



**“Daddy ball” is very common in baseball.** I pitched in the Little League World Series when I was 11 and 12 years old and then quit baseball due to daddy ball. After winning the state championship two years in a row as a pitcher, I moved to another town and the coach pitched his son the first 9 games, so I quit baseball. My son was the top pitcher in the state for five years and he quit baseball due to daddy ball (I was not his coach). I recognize firsthand the challenges of daddy ball which is why the US Baseball Club does not allow dads to coach their sons. When you are evaluating teams, do any of the coaches (head or assistants) have sons on the team? If yes, consider the position their sons play and compare it to your son. This can present a challenge for playing time and might also prevent the best players on the team from getting playing time. It can also be a strong indicator of why the coach is coaching.

**What is the team’s roster size?** The more the merrier is not ideal for a baseball team unless you are talking about pitchers. Roster size affects playing time. Teams in the US Baseball Club carry a 12-man roster. This can be increased with players who only pitch. We are not a pay-to-play organization. Playing time is earned and is based on statistics.

**Does the team keep statistics and use them to determine playing time?** I found it shocking to discover that the baseball club in Tennessee with the best collection of talent does not keep statistics! Why not!?! The game of baseball is all about statistics and playing time should be earned based on statistics. Players should be conditioned at an early age to focus on their statistics. By doing this, they become more focused on player development.

**How many tournaments are being played and where are they being played?** This will help you evaluate the total cost to play on a team. Travel costs can be extensive with food, gas, hotel and gate fees.



"ALL THIS PITCHING AND HITTING - I'M CONVINCED THERE'S A DEEPER MEANING TO IT ALL."

**Does the team offer private opportunities for player development?** The US Baseball Club offers **unlimited private instruction** to every team player under contract. I have developed a patentable swing and technology proves its the quickest way to swing a bat. I have also developed a scientific approach to pitching that eliminates arm pain while increasing velocity, accuracy and endurance. The Club has invested in the most recent technology to measure hitting and throwing metrics and we have the latest technology in radar guns and slow-motion video analysis. We have used this technology and proprietary instruction to develop 31 college ball players over the past 5 years. The coaches of the US Baseball Club not only coach the game, they teach the game. The Club offers unlimited private instruction for \$175 per month for players not on Club teams. I have 12-year-old students who can do things with a bat that major league players cannot do. We take great pride in our ability to develop better mechanics through science. Most instructors are not using technology to measure a player's progress so this requires you to trust what they are teaching works and you must trust their opinion on your son's progress. If slow-motion video analysis is not being used regularly, any instructional time is near worthless! Players need to see what their body is doing so they can connect the physical and the mental to improve as quickly as possible.

**Are there team rules?** If not, run. College coaches want accountable and responsible young men who abide by the rules. Players are never too young to learn responsibility and accountability.

**Leadership.** Are you evaluating a team that's part of an organization? If so, evaluate the leadership of the organization. The US Baseball Club is a board managed, 501c3 non-profit organization. I am the Executive Director of the Club and serve on the Board. The Board currently consists of six members and only one board member has a son that plays in the Club. Is the club focused on player development or making money?

**If evaluating a 16-18U team, inquire about college recruitment services.** How can the leadership of the team or Club help you with the college recruiting process? There are lots of companies that will take your money in attempt to get your son recruited. Most teams use expensive showcases to "offer" help in college recruiting and there are

companies that produce videos of your son that are sent to college coaches for a fee. There are also companies that “rank” player’s abilities and publish them. Hear this loud and clear: the recruitment process is not difficult! I am proud to say that NONE of the players I have seen play college ball attended a showcase. I personally produced recruiting videos of all the players and these videos are superior to the ones being used today. We integrate slow-motion video analysis and technology into the video allowing the player to explain the mechanics he uses. This is unheard of and impresses the coaches. Check out our document titled “A Guide to College Recruitment” on our website for more information and help on the recruiting process.