

An editorial on Travel Baseball

By Gregg Heenan, MYAA

Spring is fast approaching! Talk of baseball and softball is in the air. If your child is playing ball this year or has played in the past, sooner or later you will hear those five words you have been trying to avoid.....Can I play travel ball? There's no way to avoid it. It is inevitable. Travel baseball and softball has gone from rare teams sprinkled through various communities to a full blown business. Before you give a yes or no answer to your child, there are many questions that need to be answered. The following thoughts and questions should be applied to every team (including ours at the MYAA). Everywhere you turn there are new organizations popping up and there are many that have been around for years. By doing your research and becoming informed, you will save yourself some stress later on.

* First and most importantly, why does your child want to play travel ball? If any part of the answer is because their friends are doing it, you already have your answer - NO! And if any part of your mind is thinking I might sign them up because their friends are doing it - NO! Travel ball is a commitment that must come from the player and the parent because THEY want to play more ball, not because everyone else is doing it.

* Research, Research, and then some more research - Without hesitation I can rattle off more travel teams in the area than I have fingers on my hands. Every one of them is different. Travel ball should be about developing long term goals and objectives for the child. If the main objective is to win trophies, medals, and tournaments - quickly move on. Every team wants to win and yes, there should be a goal of winning. But it should not be the primary goal. You are paying extra money for the development, not trophies. Find people that are currently on the team and that you trust will give you an honest answer. Also find ones that previously played and no longer do and find out why. There's not many coaches that will say they are not in it for the child's development. Other parents will give you the real story.

* Cost - I have seen everything from leagues stating they are "Free" to leagues that cost thousands of dollars. First, there is no such thing as a free travel league. It might be free to join, but it's not going to be free to play. Think about it. If it is a travel team, that means they travel around and play in tournaments. Tournaments have entry fees. A local tournament can range from \$250 to \$450 for a team to enter. An average team plays several tournaments per season. Do they have fields and facilities they use for free or do they have to rent them all year? Add it up. Unless the organization was left a large endowment and has it covered, someone is paying for it. A quality organization should be able to give you ALL costs up front. You might be able to offset your costs with sponsorships or fundraisers but ask what happens if you don't get a sponsor or sell the fundraiser. Most likely it is coming back on you to pay. Are uniforms included? Most travel teams look pretty good out there and the uniforms aren't cheap. How many out of town tournaments are they going to? It's fun to go on an occasional road trip but for each one factor in \$200-\$300 in hotel costs, gas money, food for the weekend, and so on. For my son's hockey team I factor in a minimum of \$400 in expenses every time I know we have an out of town tournament. Some organizations sell their league on the fact they go to the big city tournaments. But are they always necessary? There are many organizations that take advantage of quality local tournaments that you can drive to and from each day. When you sit down with the director or coach, and they should be willing to sit and discuss this with you....they should be able to list all upfront costs, the number of tournaments, out of town trips for the year, and any other costs you are responsible for. If they are not clear or skirt the question.....run. Once your child is in the program and makes friends, it will be very hard to pull them away in year two or three after you find out the real costs and you're stuck. And just because one travel team is expensive doesn't make it the best and just because a travel team is low cost doesn't make it poor quality. It comes down to the people running the team/league and how they best structure the use of your funds, set the schedules, and coordinate everything. Again, back to the prior bullet point.....research!

* Time commitment - Consider the time commitment for both you and your child. Unless the coaches are all getting paid, most teams expect some type of parent help. And if that help is not from you being on the

field because they have enough help, it will still be a time commitment for practice and games. If you or your child are not willing to put in the time, you should not consider a travel team. Most quality coaches also expect your child will be dedicated to drills outside of the scheduled practice time as well.

* Trust - Do you trust and know the organization you are joining? If you have heard people talk about shady things or things being unorganized, look into it. There might be something to it. Leagues get certain reputations for a reason. Know the people you are writing a check to.

Travel ball can go two ways. It can be a wonderful development tool when approached the right way and the organization is in it for the kids, it can also be a money pit nightmare that you wished never happened if you connect with the wrong ones. Nobody can promise you scholarships, a starting position on varsity, or specific stat lines. The right team or organization can ASSIST the child in trying to get there. As an organization that offers travel ball, if you are considering travel ball we urge you to talk to our directors. Ask them the tough questions. Come to a practice and observe. Get to know us. And then do the same thing with the others you are considering. There are a lot of great teams out here in Erie. Ultimately, a quality league doesn't care if you play for them or another team, the good coaches are looking out for the future of the sport and our kids for the area as a whole. Take your time to find them.