



Travel team

Travel teams are rapidly gaining prevalence across the youth sports landscape. Often viewed as the elite version of recreational sports, travel teams are generally known for more intense and frequent practices, tougher competition and a calendar-packed schedule of games played at venues around the country.

So as the summer sports season heats up, and travel tournaments commence in big cities and small towns, coaches of these teams are confronting their enormous responsibilities that are vastly different, and more challenging, than coaching a recreational team.

Travel coaches have more talented and highly skilled players on their team who are more focused on winning and also on honing their skills so they can continue competing in the sport at higher levels.

And they've got parents showing up with giant expectations about what the experience will be about and what their child can gain from playing for them. And it's no secret that many parents have their child involved on these teams because they have their sights set on grabbing an athletic scholarship and believe travel teams put them on the fast track to securing one.

Yet, regardless of the level of play, a big part of a travel coach's job is still to serve as a role model and teach their players that while competition is healthy and winning is fun and striving to win is important, they should never lose focus on all the benefits that make sports so great, like sportsmanship, teamwork and respect, among others.

They have become a fixture across the youth sports landscape, providing unique opportunities for youngsters and enormous challenges for coaches. As volunteers assume these responsibility-packed coaching positions, a growing number are turning to the NYSCA Select training program to help prepare them to guide their players to rewarding seasons.

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TURNING TO TRAINING

These days an ever-increasing number of volunteer coaches of elite and travel teams are turning to training to help them meet the unique needs of their advanced players. Programs like the National Youth Sports Coaches Association (NYSCA) Select, one of the newer programs offered by the National Alliance for Youth Sports, covers many of the more complex issues that travel team coaches face while also providing a reminder of the importance of positivity and safety in competitive sports environments.

"I am always interested in enlightening myself as a coach and an athletic administrator," said Jeff Edelman of Cochran, Pa., who has coached various levels of youth baseball and softball since 1972 and most recently coached travel and high school softball. "I strongly believe that programs like NYSCA Select that offer coach training are essential to any league's success."

Similar to how coaches expect their players to practice their skills and improve upon weak points to help the team, well-trained coaches are key to a credible, well-run league.



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– Bridgette King

NYSCA Select provides an online experience following the eight recommended key topic areas outlined by the National Association for Sports and Physical Education's 2006 National Standards for Youth Sport Coaches, including philosophy and ethics; sports safety and injury prevention; physical preparation and conditioning; growth and development; teaching and communication; organization and administration; skills and tactics; and evaluation.

For Bridgette King, NYSCA Select training gave her valuable knowledge that she has put to good use in her role of president and head coach of the Lady Panthers Girls Basketball Association out of southern Dallas, Texas.

"This training has enabled me to have new material when talking to my parents and players about the life

lessons that playing a sport provides," she said. "Living in a society where so much coddling of kids is now going on, sports truly shows players that there is no coddling in athletics if you truly want to compete at the highest levels. Working hard is the only mentality to have in order to advance."

What coaches across the country are finding is that NYSCA Select delves into those areas that are vital to travel coaches and which can define a season.

"I've gone through a couple other coaches' trainings, but neither of them really provided information about what it means to coach advanced athletes and to lead an advanced-level program," said King. "NYSCA Select answered all of the questions that I had and solidified things that I always think about, like how much growth and development is needed, nutritional guidelines of youth athletes, expectations of travel and my role as their coach, and the seriousness of the time investment of being a coach of an advanced team."

Derek Sabedra, a tennis coach from Huntingtown, Md., with more than seven years of experience working with travel and high school tennis players says, "NYSCA Select provided a wealth of information of tactical and strategical data for coaching." He adds that training has also helped him with communicating with parents, and even served as an outlet to revisit and improve his general coaching skills.

STEPPING UP TO SELECT

NYSCA Select was designed with advanced coaches in mind. Its principles build upon basic information of coaching youth sports to remind coaches that there is still room for

sportsmanship and teamwork in a competitive environment. NAYS offers NYSCA as a prerequisite for NYSCA Select.

NYSCA training lays the groundwork for coaching youth sports with an education on topics such as the psychology of coaching youth sports, communication skills, working with parents and preventing child abuse and injuries, while reminding coaches to give each child a fun, memorable youth sports experience. NYSCA coaches also go through sport-specific training.

According to William Florence, a coach at Edwards Air Force Base in California, his success with NYSCA in the past encouraged him to complete NYSCA Select training too.

"My past experience with NYSCA exceeded my expectations," Florence said. "As a result, I wanted to further my knowledge with the Select program."

Florence currently coaches under-8 soccer and T-ball for 5- and 6-year-olds, and plans to coach older age groups in the coming years.

“NYSCA Select increased my knowledge in areas I was lacking and has given me more confidence to coach advance athletes,” he said.

Veteran coach Paul Dozier with the South Garland Little League in Sachse, Texas, had a similar experience. “I was interested in NYSCA Select because I had already taken other trainings from NYSCA,” he explained. “They were great, so it seemed like NYSCA Select would be a good fit, and it was.” Over the past decade he has taught volleyball, basketball and baseball and has even sat as a board member in the leagues he participated in.

There’s no denying the increasing popularity of technology in youth sports today. Teams can have their own websites to post game day pictures and practice schedules, and parents can register their child online instead of going in to the local recreation department’s office. And with NYSCA Select, volunteer coaches can complete their coach training online, at the time best suited for their busy schedules.

“NYSCA Select’s online format was excellent,” said Dozier. “Between working and coaching, it can be hard to schedule the time to go to a live class. I was able to work at my own pace and on my own timeframe.”

“I do not discount live training,” said King. “But I prefer to take online classes when I can. My learning style allows for online training to keep me motivated and disciplined in order to complete the course.”

The NYSCA online clinic features video interviews from college coaches, athletic trainers, medical doctors and other experts in the sports industry to give coaches guidance from their respective fields. Its online format allows coaches access to educational material they can use to advance their coaching knowledge that they may otherwise not have had. And since the coaches control the speed of which they progress through the training, they can review information or re-watch the videos at their discretion.

“While live trainings can certainly be beneficial, having a chance to closely examine and re-examine the content as needed is something that’s difficult to do in a live training where there are usually time constraints,” Edelman said. 

For more information about NYSCA Select visit www.nays.org/coaches/nysca-select.cfm.

Keeping tournament visitors in check

The state-of-the-art recreation complex of the Glynn County (Ga.) Recreation and Parks department hosts nearly 50 youth sports tournaments each year.

Like many other recreation departments, Glynn County’s facilities will set the stage for baseball and softball tournaments throughout the summer. With a calendar packed with tournaments dates, the staff at Glynn County make it a priority

to hold participants from visiting leagues accountable to the county’s youth sports philosophy.

“Since we know what we expect from and desire from travel tournaments, our regular season recreation philosophies carry over to the tournaments as well,” said Steve Mellinger, the program manager of the Glynn County Recreation and Parks department and a Certified Youth Sports Administrator.

Here are some steps Glynn County recreation staff takes to keep coaches and parents in line during tournaments:

Act immediately when there’s trouble.

“If someone is allowed to badger a player, coach or officials and no one says a thing until it gets out of hand...you have now become a part of the problem,” said Mellinger. “For me personally, if parents or coaches release their anger or frustration out in front of the kids, they are removed immediately. If it comes from a parent then we talk to the coaches and let them know that their parents are their problem, too, and if they can’t calm them down, the team will either forfeit or be removed.”

Keep a volunteer application in your back pocket.

Mellinger says that when a parent acts rude toward an official, he hands them an umpire application. “They always ask, ‘What’s this?’ and I let them know that as soon as they get the application completed, their first game is in 15 minutes,” he said. “They usually quit it right then and there.”

Tell the coaches what is expected.

Sometimes right before the pre-game coin toss, Mellinger will remind the coaches about what kind of behavior he expects out of them. “If I have a coach I know has had problems with thinking the official made some ‘bad calls’ before, I will ask them when was the last time you saw an umpire charge a dugout and scream and holler at a coach for making a mad decision. They usually answer, ‘I’ve never seen that before.’” He then reminds the coach to show the umpire the same respect.