

The First Year of Travel Ball

A straight-talking guide for parents of new travel baseball and softball players
(8U–14U)

Before you read this

Here's the view from the high school level: every year, a new group of freshmen walks in — and by October, it's obvious which ones played travel ball the right way and which ones didn't.

Here's what most parents don't expect: the difference is almost never talent. It's reps. It's coachability. It's whether the kid still loves the game at fourteen. And those things get decided years earlier — at 10U practices, in the car ride home, in living rooms where parents either got this stuff right or got it wrong.

Your kid just made a travel team, or they're about to try out. Either way, you're spending real money and real weekends on this, and nobody hands you a manual.

This is the manual I wish every parent got at the first team meeting. Everything in here is what I'd tell you over the fence if we had an hour — the stuff that actually prepares a kid for the next level, and the stuff that doesn't.

No fluff. No sales pitch. Just what matters.

1. What it really costs

Nobody puts the full number on the flyer. Here's what a typical season actually runs — baseball and softball cost about the same at this level — so you can budget instead of getting surprised in March.

Team fees: \$500–\$1,500 per year [verify]

This is the check you write to the club. It usually covers field rentals, umpires for league games, insurance, league registration, and a share of tournament entry fees. At 8U and 10U it's usually the lower end. By 14U, especially at bigger clubs, expect the higher end — sometimes more.

Ask what's included before you write the check. "Team fees" means different things to different organizations.

Uniforms and gear package: \$150–\$300 [verify]

Jerseys, pants, socks, belt, helmet. Some clubs hand you a package; some give you a list and let you buy it yourself. If you're buying: two pairs of pants, not one. Your kid will slide in mud at least once before the first tournament.

Tournament fees: usually baked into team fees, but not always

Some clubs charge a separate tournament fund — \$300–\$600 per family per season [verify] — on top of team fees. Ask. This is the line item that blindsides parents the most.

Travel: \$100–\$200 per away weekend [verify]

Gas, hotel (figure \$120–\$150 a night), food for the family. Most 8U–12U teams stay close to home with two or three overnight weekends a year. By 14U, showcase-style tournaments can mean real travel. You don't need to know all of this in year one. Just know the weekends exist.

Extras: \$200–\$500 a year [verify]

Batting gloves, a new bat at some point, cleats they outgrow by July, the team hoodie they absolutely need. It adds up. Budget for it now and it won't sting.

Private lessons: \$40–\$75 an hour [verify]

Optional in year one. Useful if your kid wants to pitch or catch, where mechanics matter and bad habits form fast. For hitting, save your money until they're swinging three times a week on their own. Lessons don't fix a kid who never touches a bat between them.

The honest total: a first year of travel ball typically runs **\$1,200–\$3,000 per player** [verify], depending on your area, the club, and how far you drive. Big-city clubs and heavy tournament schedules run higher. None of these numbers are guarantees — costs vary a lot by region — but they're in the right neighborhood.

One rule: get the full cost in writing before you commit. Every fee, every due date. A good organization hands you this without being asked.

2. Gear: what matters and what's marketing

Walk into a sporting goods store and you'll see \$400 bats, \$150 gloves, and a wall of accessories nobody needs. Here's the real list — with the baseball/softball differences called out where they matter.

Buy it right

Glove: \$60–\$120 [verify]

This is the one piece of equipment worth spending on early. A decent leather glove, broken in properly, lasts three or four seasons. A cheap vinyl glove falls apart in one and makes every ball harder to catch.

Fit matters more than brand. Their fingers should reach the ends without stretching. If they can barely close it, it's too big — hand-me-downs from an older sibling are the number one cause of "my kid can't catch."

Two things that differ by sport:

- **Softball gloves** have deeper pockets and slightly larger patterns, built for the bigger ball. **Baseball gloves** run smaller and shallower. A baseball glove works for a young softball player in a pinch, but get the right one if you can — the pocket shape matters more than people think.
- **Position patterns matter, but not yet.** Infield gloves are smaller with shallow pockets for quick transfers; outfield gloves are longer with deeper pockets. For a first travel glove, a middle-infield pattern works fine anywhere on the field. Don't buy a first baseman's mitt or a catcher's mitt unless that's their actual position. [verify]

Break it in the slow way: play catch, oil it lightly, put a ball in the pocket and wrap it overnight. There is no shortcut worth taking. The microwave trick ruins gloves. Don't.

Bat: \$100–\$250 for a first travel bat [verify]

Here's what actually matters, in order:

The stamp. Check which bats your league allows before you buy anything. Softball uses USA Softball and USSSA stamps. Baseball uses USA Baseball or USSSA 1.15 BPF — and they are not interchangeable. Some tournaments check bats at the gate. [verify current stamp rules for your sanctioning body] Buying a bat your kid can't use in games is an expensive mistake, and it happens every season.

The weight. This is where parents go wrong. A bat that's too heavy slows the swing and wrecks mechanics. For 8U–10U softball, look for a drop -11 or -12. For 12U softball, drop -10 or -11. For 8U–10U baseball, drop -10 or -11; by 12U–14U baseball, most kids move to drop -8 or -5 as they get stronger. [verify] The test is the same for both sports: if they can't hold the bat straight out in front of them with one hand for ten seconds, it's too heavy.

The price. Your 10-year-old does not need a \$400 composite bat. They need 200 swings a week. A \$120–\$180 alloy bat [verify] will do everything a young hitter needs. Expensive bats help good hitters hit slightly better. They don't make hitters.

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Let the bat find their swing, not the other way around.

Cleats: \$30–\$60 [verify]

Molded rubber or plastic — same for baseball and softball. Most youth leagues ban metal spikes, so check before you buy. [verify your league's rule] Buy them a half-size roomy; feet grow mid-season. Replace them when the traction wears smooth, not when they look cool enough to upgrade.

Helmet: \$30–\$50 [verify]

Non-negotiable, both sports. Softball: get one with a face mask, full stop. Baseball: a helmet is required everywhere; a face guard is optional but smart at 10U and 12U, when pitchers are wild and infielders are close. [verify your league's rule] Either way, it should fit snug — no wobbling when they shake their head. If the team doesn't provide one, buy one.

Buy it simple

Bag: \$40–\$80 [verify]

A backpack-style bat bag that holds two bats, a glove, a helmet, and a water bottle. That's it. Skip the rolling bags for young kids — they're heavy, they're slow, and your kid will leave it in the dugout doorway where everyone trips on it.

Batting gloves: \$15–\$30 [verify]

Nice to have, not essential. They help with grip and blisters once the swing count goes up. One pair per season is plenty.

Skip it (for now)

- **A \$400 bat for a 9-year-old.** Covered above. The bat isn't the problem.
- **Weighted donuts and heavy training bats.** Bad for young swings in both sports. They teach kids to drag the bat instead of driving through the ball.
- **The matching everything.** Matching bag, matching helmet bag, matching water bottle. It costs \$200 and wins zero games.
- **A personal pitching machine for the garage.** They're 10. Go throw front toss in the yard. That's better coaching than any machine.

The gear rule

If it doesn't touch the ball or keep them safe, it's optional. Spend the money on the glove, get the bat size right, and put the rest toward tournament fees.

3. How tryouts actually work

Tryouts feel mysterious. They're not. Here's what's happening on the other side of the fence — same process for baseball and softball.

What coaches evaluate

Most tryouts run 60–90 minutes with stations. Your kid will rotate through some version of this:

- **Fielding:** ground balls and fly balls, 10–15 reps. Coaches watch footwork and whether they move through the ball, not whether they field every one clean.

- **Throwing:** accuracy over distance. Can they hit the target? A strong arm with no accuracy loses to an average arm that hits the chest.
- **Hitting:** tee work or soft toss, then live or machine pitching. Coaches look at the swing, not the results. A good swing that misses beats a bad swing that blooped one in.
- **Running:** timed home to first, usually. Speed matters, but hustle matters more.
- **Pitchers and catchers:** separate evaluation. If your kid pitches, they'll throw 15–20 pitches to a catcher while a coach watches mechanics, control, and composure — in that order.

And the thing nobody tells you: **coaches are evaluating attitude the whole time.** Do they hustle between stations? Do they pick up the ball they just missed? How do they react to a bad rep? Coaches do this all the time: a coachable kid with an average arm beats a talented kid with a bad attitude for the last roster spot.

How teams get picked

After tryouts, coaches sit down with notes and build a roster. It's not a pure ranking. They're filling positions: they need two or three pitchers, a catcher or two, middle infielders who can throw, outfielders who can run. A great shortstop might get cut because the team already has two. That's not politics. That's a roster.

Typical roster size is 11–13 players [verify]. Most tryouts draw 25–50 kids for those spots at 10U and 12U [verify]. Do the math: a lot of good players don't make it. It's not a verdict on your kid. It's arithmetic.

What the numbers game looks like

Some clubs run one team per age group. Some run three — an A team, a B team, a C team. Getting offered the B team is not an insult. At 10U, the B team with a good coach who plays everyone is worth more than the A team where your kid sits. Development is the whole point at this age. The team name on the jersey doesn't develop them. Reps do.

If they don't make a team: it's fine. Genuinely. Half the best players I ever coached got cut at 10U. The ones who kept playing — rec league, another club's tryout, the backyard with a parent — were better at 14U than the ones who made it easy at 10U and stopped working. How they handle the cut teaches them more than making the team would have.

4. Red flags in programs

Most travel programs are run by good people. Some aren't. Here's how to tell the difference before your money's gone.

The coach's kid never sits.

Every parent-coach faces this. The good ones bench their own kid when it's earned. If the coach's kid plays shortstop every inning of every game while two better fielders rotate the outfield, you're looking at daddy-ball. It won't get better in June. It'll get worse.

Nobody will give you the costs in writing.

You ask what the season costs and get "oh, around a thousand, plus some tournament stuff." That's not an answer. A real program has a budget sheet: fees, due dates, what's included, what isn't. If they can't produce one, the surprise charges are coming.

New head coach every year.

Some turnover is normal — coaches' kids age out, jobs change. But a program that burns through a head coach every season has a problem, and the problem is usually the person running the program, not the coaches.

A 10U team that cuts kids for not being elite.

At 10U, development is the job. A program that treats 10-year-olds like college recruits — cutting the bottom third, running off kids who are "behind" — is selling wins to parents, not building players. The irony: those programs lose their best kids by 14U anyway, because the kids who were developed properly pass them.

Pressure to quit other sports.

If a 10U or 12U coach tells your kid they need to pick one sport and drop everything else, walk away. Multi-sport kids are better athletes, get hurt less, and burn out less. Any coach demanding single-sport specialization before high school is serving their roster, not your kid.

Win-at-all-costs behavior at 10U.

Screaming at umpires. Pitching one kid 200 pitches in a weekend. Bench-clearing drama over a pool-play game. Watch one of their games before you commit. The program's real culture is on the field on a Saturday, not in the parent meeting.

No development plan.

Ask what the winter looks like. Ask what a typical practice covers. If the answer is vague — "we'll get together and hit" — there's no plan. Good programs can tell you what they're working on in November, January, and March, and why.

Rosters of 14 or 15 at 10U.

That's not a team. That's a revenue model. With 14 kids on a 10U roster, your kid plays three innings a game and gets two at-bats on a good day. Eleven or twelve is a real roster. [verify typical roster norms] Every kid beyond that is paying full price for half the reps.

5. What to ask a coach before committing

You don't need twenty questions. You need six or seven sharp ones, asked in person, with the coach looking you in the eye. Look at it from the high school level: these are the questions that separate the programs that prepare kids from the ones that don't.

"What's the full cost of the season, in writing, with due dates?" If they can't hand it to you, see red flag number two above.

"How do you handle playing time?" Listen for specifics. "Everyone plays" is a slogan. "We rotate the lineup and every kid sits one inning per game" is a policy. At 10U and 12U, you want development language. At 14U, earning time is fair — but it should still be explainable.

"What's your coaching background, and who are your assistants?" You're not looking for a pro resume. You're looking for someone who's coached kids before and has help. One adult trying to run a 12-kid practice alone is a babysitting operation.

"What does a typical week look like — practices, and what's the winter plan?" This tells you whether there's a development plan or just a tournament schedule. Two practices a week in season is standard [verify]. A real offseason plan is the mark of a program that takes development seriously.

"What's your policy on missed practices and missed tournaments?" Kids get sick. Families have weddings. You need to know now whether a missed Sunday means a lecture or a benching. Get the answer before August, not during it.

"How do you communicate with parents — and how often?" A team app, a weekly email, a group text — any of them work. "I'll let you know" doesn't. You want to know where to be and when without chasing anyone.

"When your kids age out, what do the ones who make it at the next level have in common?" Ask it straight. This is the question most parents never ask, and it's the one that matters most. Good coaches light up — they'll talk about work ethic, coachability, kids who practiced on their own. If the answer is about their win-loss record, you just learned everything.

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Ask these before the check clears, not after.

6. Your first 30 days: the new travel-ball parent checklist

The season's starting. Here's how to get it right from day one.

Week 1: Get organized

- Put every practice, tournament, and fee due date on the family calendar now — not the week of.
- Get the team communication app set up and notifications on. Missing a schedule change because you didn't see the message is on you.
- Confirm the full cost in writing and set up payment. No surprises later.
- Check their gear: glove fits, bat has the right stamp and weight, cleats fit, helmet fits. Fix it now, not at the first tournament.

Week 2: Learn the landscape

- Introduce yourself to the coach. Not with feedback — with your name and your kid's name. That's it.
- Learn the other parents' names. You'll spend 40 weekends with these people. Be someone they like sitting next to.
- Learn the tournament format basics: pool play, bracket play, what "drop dead" time limits mean. Ask another parent, not the coach during a game.
- Pack the tournament bag: sunscreen, folding chairs, a cooler with real food, a blanket for cold mornings, cash for the gate fee. The parents who pack well have better weekends. Every time.

Weeks 3–4: Settle into your role

- Volunteer for one thing. Scorebook, dugout help, team tent setup. Pick one and do it well. The program runs on parents who show up.
- Let the coach coach. From the stands, cheer for good plays — both teams. Never coach from the bleachers. Your kid can hear you, and it puts them in an impossible spot between you and their coach.
- Watch your kid, not the scoreboard. The first month is about whether they're getting reps, making friends, and wanting to go back. Wins are irrelevant in April.
- Budget check: track what you've actually spent against what you planned. Adjust now.

The one rule for the whole season:

They'll strike out. A lot. They'll boot ground balls they should have had. They'll have a tournament where nothing goes right.

Your job is the car ride home. Keep it short. "I love watching you play" covers almost everything. The analysis can wait — and most of the time, it should wait forever. The kids who last in this sport are the ones whose parents made the car ride safe.

That's the deal at this age. The rest is details.

One more thing

Every year, a new group of freshmen walks into high school programs — some ready, some not — and the difference was decided years earlier, by parents who understood this stuff and parents who didn't. If this guide was useful, there's one email like it every week. *From the Dugout* is a free weekly newsletter for parents of travel baseball and softball players — what your kid's coach wishes you knew, in plain language, five minutes a week. No hype, no sales funnels. Just the email, every week.

Sign up free. See you next week.