

The Evolution of High School Sports Travel

By Danny Machaj



In recent years nationally ranked high school athletic programs have begun traveling to different states to match up against other top-ranked schools, but just why do they travel and how are high schools able to pay for these extravagant trips? More specifically, why do top-ranked public high schools travel and how are they able to make these trips happen?

Most of the time you will see private high schools doing most of the traveling when there is a private versus public school matchup. This is because private schools get ten to fifteen, and sometimes up to twenty thousand dollars in tuition from each student. Also since their funds are not connected to the city and taxpayers, they can do whatever they want with their money. They definitely have much more of it at their disposal.

However, public schools want to travel too. They want that expanded exposure, and just the overall fun and bonding that comes with traveling with teammates.

“Who doesn’t want to go on a cool trip to play against another state's best, and get more looks from different colleges?” Liam Wilson of the Hamilton High School baseball team said, as he recently got back from the USA Baseball High School Invitational.

The Gist

Although there are differences between each sport, public high schools have a fairly similar method of organizing these big trips to play against a school, or multiple schools in out of state tournaments.

There are a few key aspects that a high school athletic program needs to have. Solid fundraising, booster club support, and to be in touch with promoters who help set up the game or tournaments. Oh, and there is the most important aspect. Your team has to be pretty darn good.

The three main high school sports that make these trips are football, basketball and baseball. In some instances soccer, volleyball, and lacrosse teams will play in a neighboring state.

Football and basketball are sports that have the most similar process of getting these games together, by in many cases nationally televising the game. Baseball however, functions a little bit differently as teams travel to play in tournaments. Baseball teams size themselves up against multiple schools from multiple states and rarely have a nationally televised game. For public schools, it all begins with funding.

Fundraising and Boosters

So where do the funds come from that pay for these trips? The best way to make it happen is a combination of things. Team fundraising, boosters, parents, and in many cases athletic directors and promoters.

One vs. Multiple

Depending on how big a high school is, they either have a single booster club, or multiple clubs for each sport. Smaller schools usually have one club. It also depends on which sport is the best and most profitable out of them. However, even though football often is not the best sport at the school, it is still the most profitable.

Arizona State University student, and former Red Mountain High School baseball player Jacob Wells shared his thoughts on football being favored.

“It was definitely annoying that football would seem to get new jerseys every year, and we’re using the same ones from five or six years ago.”

Many players of different sports also feel this way. The cold truth is that due to the fact that football programs produce the most revenue for high school athletic departments, they use more money because they need it to be able to get that revenue. Most schools depend on football to fund the other sports.

“I understand it, but it still irritated me,” Wells said.

Most of the time, sports other than football, and in few cases basketball, have free attendance for their games, with the exception of playoffs and if they make a trip out of state. Football gets to use the most money either way because it’s one of, if not the most expensive sports. More players on the team, which means more equipment, which means more cost.

Also, in the past decade the world of football has emphasized the importance of creating safer football equipment. In turn, high school football programs are urged to buy the safest equipment they can find.

A positive about a bigger school like Red Mountain that has an each-sport type of booster club style, is that the boosters tend to be more dedicated because their son or daughter plays on the team that they are supporting. However, football still takes a cut from others if need be.

That’s the thing with one big booster club. Potential boosters might be hesitant to join because their kid only plays one sport. Active boosters might become frustrated that their kid’s sport doesn’t get the same funds as football. One or multiple clubs, football has always been the money maker.

The Big Dogs

Fundraising, for the top-ranked public high schools in the more well off school districts, is usually done by the booster club giving the players coupon cards with different restaurants attached. They then go door to door to ask people if they want to buy one to support the team. Teams will also similarly go door to door, asking people if they want to support the team by buying things like assorted cookies and other treats.

Booster clubs play a huge role in supporting public high school athletic programs and give tremendous help on the fundraising side of things. Hamilton High School football head coach Mike Zdebski explained how important the boosters are, and how much hard work goes into acquiring the needed funds.

“They organize big fundraising events like golf outings, coin drives, and cornhole tournaments,” Zdebski said, “a collective effort is really important if we want to be able to go on these trips.”

Zdebski also explained that other than occasional help from the athletic director, and promoters who often organize the interstate games, the bulk of the weight is on the team and the boosters.

“For the most part, we pretty much have to fend for ourselves,” he said.

There is also the parent fee. If need be, parents will be asked to pay a sum of money for sports expenses like hotels and buses or flights including other expenses like food, and gas. Then, they eventually get a tax credit reimbursing them. This though consequently could create conflict with parents of bench players who basically pay for no play.

The athletic director could also give the team funds for those reasons, just in case the parent fee might not cover the total expenses for the trip.

“Our AD gave us \$2500 for travel this past season,” Zdebski said.

Although there are struggles in trying to get these games, the better known and wealthier public schools and districts across the country have it far better than others.

The Underdogs

Alhambra High School is an inner-city school that lies on the northwest side of Phoenix, and they have a very good baseball team. Despite losing no more than two games per season in three consecutive seasons, the team along with the rest of the sports, don't get much funding and support.

Even though their baseball team is highly ranked, the school unfortunately isn't able to form a booster club, let alone send their baseball team to North Carolina like Hamilton. Coach Shea Clark of the Alhambra baseball team addressed the struggles that his team faces.

“Lots of these kids have never been on a plane or even left the state,” Clark said, “we would love to go play in those tournaments, we just don't have the funds.”

Though there is not much the team can control on the financial side of things, Coach Clark keeps the team motivated.

“All we can do is keep winning and try to make it back to the state championship,” he said.

One could compare the Alhambra baseball team, at least skill and schedule wise, to the Gonzaga basketball team. Both teams may not play the best competition during the regular season, but they can still hang with the so-called bigger and better schools. They take the cards they're dealt and try to win as many games as they can, just like everybody else.

Wendy Truvillion, the athletic director at Alhambra, has one of the toughest jobs in an inner-city district. Especially at a school without a booster club. Truvillion was a track and field national champion at LSU, and explained how she wants to give her student athletes the same glory.

“I just want the same opportunities for my programs, and players to be able to flourish and expand to the levels I did,” Truvillion said.

She also mentioned that a good amount of their athletic funding comes from anonymous donations and alumni. Although it isn't much, it is still very helpful. Effort is another thing she prides her school and herself on.

“It’s a bummer when we don’t have as much funding as the highly funded schools, and it humbles us, but it also gives us a reason to work harder and meet those same levels of academic and sports performance,” Truvillion said.

It’s truly frustrating to see how inner city high schools are given so much less opportunity. However, they still keep their heads high and work as hard, if not harder than any other schools.

Money

If a game is televised by ESPN, they will likely pay the school a small rights fee. Other than that, they just show up and cover the game. And they make significantly more money from broadcasting the game than they pay to be able to broadcast it.

So why isn’t ESPN giving these schools more money when many of the schools, even the ones that don’t travel and host the games are already in debt? High schools with powerhouse football teams across the country will spend upwards of a million dollars on their team in just one season. Many of these high spending schools are in Texas.

As many know, football has a special importance to Texas and its people. The saying ‘everything’s bigger in Texas’ definitely rings true when talking about high school football. The stadiums are bigger and have big luxury press boxes. The largest high school stadium in the state can seat 18,000 spectators. However, what these schools must also do in order to get these bigger and better things, is spend big.

Lonnie Jordan, the football coach at Dallas area’s Lake Highlands High School explained how difficult it is to keep up with the bigger spenders of the schools in Texas.

“Even when we are able to spend more money than other years, it’s tough to keep our spending below our total revenue from each season,” Jordan said.

Lake Highlands has recently played a game televised by ESPN Dallas. Jordan also touched on the frustrations of spending the money leading up to the game and not receiving much in return.

“It sucks, but at the end of the day there ain’t much we can do about it. We work very hard to get these games, and because it’s rare to, it’s a no-brainer to up the spending for that season,” Jordan said.

For Lake Highlands the only traveling that they have done is up to Oklahoma, as their conference is tough and their road to the state championship is more difficult than most. However, the goal remains for any high school football team. To win state and get chosen to play in the ESPN state champions game to gain exposure.

Recruiting and Exposure

The biggest reason why high schools travel to play out of state is to give their players a shot to get recruited by as many colleges as possible. In hopes that they can keep playing the game they love at the next level.

It’s always fun to travel with teammates and play in different places, but what these high school players really want is for scouts to be interested in them. These trips are also good for the schools because they get more recognition nationwide.

Head Coach of the Chandler High School football team Rick Garretson touched on how getting recruited at the out of state games helps the team as a whole.

“When they perform in these games in front of scouts from highly ranked universities, it really instills confidence in our guys that they are one of the best in the country,” Garretson said,

“which can lead to our main goal of a state championship, which translates to the players getting more recognition and exposure.”

Chandler’s football team is consistently one of the top teams in the state of Arizona and won five straight state championships from 2016 to 2020. They also have played multiple nationally televised games in the past decade. One of them is the ESPN Geico State Champions Bowl Series.

This series is typically two games with four high school state champion teams from the chosen states. Playing in this game means considerably more exposure, as ESPN is the most popular sports outlet in the country.

Garretson also described how, as mentioned, there is usually money from ESPN or any network that covers the game, given to the home team.

“Most of the time, if you get an ESPN game, they’ll give the school a rights fee that’s probably around one to two grand,” he said.

Basketball, as mentioned, is quite similar to football when televising games. There is the ESPN Geico High School Basketball Showcase, where most recently Sierra Canyon, LeBron James’ son Bronny’s high school, traveled to play Glenbard West of the Chicago suburbs at the United Center.

The Glenbard West basketball team has been good the past few seasons, but this season they were far better than the competition. Despite barely falling to Sierra Canyon on a buzzer beater, they easily ended up taking home the state title. Head coach Jason Opoka mentioned how important this game was for the team and the school.

“It was major for us to be able to play in this game because we aren’t able to travel out of state,” Opoka said, “it’s awesome for our players to get the extra exposure that being in this game provides.”

Unfortunately for Glenbard West, their administration declined out of state travel. So they only get to play Illinois schools, unless of course another state's school comes to play them.

“We had some options to play at some high profile tournaments, but couldn't attend,” Opoka said, “we were definitely happy that Sierra Canyon was able to come here.”

High school teams pretty much need to be invited to these games and events. One school, Bishop Sycamore in Columbus, Ohio, went to unthinkable lengths to be invited to a game on ESPN.

The team lied about how many highly sought after college recruits that they had. When a game to play at IMG Academy was organized, it was advertised to be a great prep school matchup. Yet, the truth is it wasn't. It surprisingly took a while for everyone to realize that Bishop Sycamore wasn't the real deal.

Everyone just assumed IMG was much better. It wasn't that IMG was good, but more that Bishop Sycamore wasn't good. Sycamore would play them twice and lose both with a combined score of 114-6.

It certainly makes it unfair to schools like Alhambra. Why can a mediocre team like Bishop Sycamore cheat their way into a nationally televised game, and great inner city teams like Alhambra baseball don't even get an invite to anything?

“It's definitely frustrating that we don't get the same opportunities as others in terms of recruiting,” Coach Clark said, “I don't know anything about promoters.”

Money isn't even the big issue in this case. If they could at least get an invite, it is possible that they get donations or get a gofundme going to be able to travel.

As baseball usually plays tournaments, they still rarely get a game televised. These events though are flooded with baseball scouts from all over the country. The tournaments are very important

because they are, for the high school team, allowing some of the most exposure that the players can get.

Again, a given team in any of these sports usually has to be highly ranked because an invite is needed for most of these games. For tournaments, teams will be contacted by promoters from the tournament and organizations that are sponsoring the event. For single games, it tends to be one organization picking who they want to play in the game or tourney, and sending promoters to contact the teams and set the whole thing up.

Being invited to these games means a lot to the schools because they are competing with the surge of travel and club sports. Schools want to be able to give the same things that travel programs do.

The Rise of Travel and Club Sports

Over the past few decades the presence of youth and high school travel sports has increased very quickly. From baseball, softball, and volleyball teams, to AAU basketball, to youth Pop Warner, seven-on-seven football leagues and more. A whole new idea that would make young athletes more skilled than they have ever been, and create what has turned out to be a ginormous market.

Before travel sports existed, Jay Hornacek was growing up in the Chicago suburbs in the seventies with, like many young boys, a dream to play baseball in the major leagues.

“It was pretty much Little League, to Babe Ruth League, and then high school. Then you would either enter the draft or go play in college.”

Today athletes are able to gain much more exposure in terms of recruiting. Hornacek did end up entering the draft and fulfilling his dream with a few solid stints in the majors, and explained how much different the journey to professional baseball is today.

“There are so many more kids that are as good or better than you... there is no way I would have made it to the bigs if I was born thirty years later.”

The reason why there are so many more highly skilled players nowadays? Travel sports.

Young athletes in all organized sports have plenty more opportunity to practice and work on their craft than before. There were no batting facilities or multiple court gyms for practicing basketball or volleyball. Also in the offseason, competitive athletes today have facilities that they can continue practicing at, and are on organized travel teams that schedule offseason workouts and practices.

“All I did in the offseason was hope one of my brothers would bundle up with me and head to the field to throw me batting practice,” Hornacek said, “and it was on me to get up and go work on my game.”

Although the first indoor and circular-style batting cages began popping up in the mid-seventies, according to Stella’s Batting Cages, which was one of the first in the Chicagoland area and the only indoor option near Hornacek’s house, it was not built until after he had already been playing professionally in the mid nineties.

Some would say that travel and club sports are great for many different reasons. Like that it’s great for recruiting, for keeping skills fresh, and to keep in good physical condition. Others think it has become a scam and not worth all the money.

A few reasons why many high school players show more focus to their travel team could be that they get to consistently travel out of state, and they might not get as many looks from recruiters as they do on their travel team . Head baseball coach of Lyons Township High School, Kevin Diete isn’t too fond of travel sports.

“Sure travel teams are good for the kids in many ways, but as a high school coach, it’s frustrating in certain circumstances when, say, I can’t use a pitcher on the day that I want to because he threw five innings for his travel team a few days before,” Diete said.

Situations like this usually happen during a high school baseball team’s summer season. Although the travel and club baseball season doesn’t begin until the very end of the regular school spring season, most players will focus on their travel team because the high school summer season isn’t the main season. And of course get more exposure with their club teams.

This all is a big reason why high schools want to travel out of state. They want to be able to have the best opportunity to be noticed, and give the players the same opportunities and exposure that their travel or club teams do.

The Future

Is there a bright future for televising high school games? Will more high schools begin to travel out of state for games? We’ll certainly find out. As college sports are changing, it might create a lane for high school sports to become as popular.

Kids today are talking about multiple high school prospects almost as much as they do college. Not too long ago they were only talking about superstars like Kobe and Lebron. Nobody really knew about Michael Jordan until his UNC days.

At the end of the day, high school athletes want to go on these trips to be seen and known, and become a hall of famer like the ones above. Maybe one day, it will be a normal occurrence to see high school sports on national television and the opportunity for high schools to travel across the country.