Irvine PONY Baseball and the Inclusion of Travel/Club Teams in 2012

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS:

Q: We have heard about Irvine Pony accepting travel teams into the Bronco and Mustang divisions. Why is the league doing this?
A: It's clear that the "travel ball" trend in youth baseball (or sports in general) is something that is affecting youth Pony and Little Leagues everywhere. As a league which has always tried to be pro-active and progressive in doing everything we can to provide an enjoyable family environment with competitive balance and good baseball instruction at the lowest cost possible, we intend to work with the trend, rather than against it. By introducing a way to keep more of our Irvine kids playing within Irvine Pony, we believe it's a positive step in strengthening and growing the league, and creating more opportunities for our community's young athletes to participate in the fun that our league brings. As a league, we're doing everything we can to minimize the challenges that naturally come with any change, and we appreciate the need to try to be flexible and responsive to the needs of the Irvine parents and youth baseball players.

Q: How will the Bronco and Mustang divisions be affected?
A: The biggest change is that Bronco and Mustang will each include a "Select" division, in addition to our traditional "NL" and "AL" divisions. In the past, the NL division generally included the top 25-30% ranked players in each age group (i.e. 11-12 for Bronco, and 9-10 for Mustang), with AL comprised of the remaining 70-75%. Now, we expect the Select and NL divisions will include the players ranked in the top 50%, with AL comprised of players ranked outside the top 50%. This is, of course, subject to variation based on quantity of player sign-ups, overall talent level among travel teams and non-travel players, available managers and coaches, etc. With three tiers within the same division, the competition will be enhanced and the youth experience will generally be better because of the opportunity to play with and against players of more comparable skill level. Otherwise, the divisions will be much the same as in years past.

Q: Will the rules be any different?
A: In the past, there have been some rule distinctions in NL vs AL that are largely due to the competitive differences of those divisions. Such rules are likely to stay intact. The Select division will generally replicate the NL division with one meaningful exception: minimum playing time rules (i.e. "each player must play at least one infield inning" or "no player may sit out two innings until all players have sat out at least one inning") will likely be eliminated, which is more consistent with evolving travel ball rules (note that all players will be in the batting line-up, however). That said, travel and non-travel coaches in the Select division will be very strongly encouraged to be fair and balanced in their playing time decisions. While we want the Select division to be competitive, far more important is the enjoyment and development of all players. While we are accepting travel teams, Irvine Pony continues to be, at its heart, a recreational community league, first and foremost.

Q: Will we continue to have an inter-locking schedule with Saddleback Pony and other leagues?
A: Yes. Teams from other leagues will be a part of our schedule, as in prior years. These teams will be "assigned" to Select or NL divisions based on their talent/experience. Such teams are not expected to be part of our playoffs.

Q: My son is not on a travel team; does he need to find one to play for this spring?
A: No. Individual players can register the same as in previous years. They will attend player evaluations, and be drafted onto a non-travel team in NL or AL (or possibly Select) -- in any case based on their baseball experience and ability.

Q: My son currently plays on a travel team in the fall, but he would rather play with his other Pony friends during the spring; can he sign up as an individual player?
A: Yes. As described above, he can register individually, attend player evaluations, and be drafted onto a non-travel team in NL or AL (or possibly Select) -- in any case based on his baseball experience and ability.

Q: Is the Select division only for travel teams?
A: That is very likely the case, but we are still evaluating. It is possible that the top ranked non-travel players will also play Select (on drafted, non-travel teams). In addition, some travel teams (for example, a less experienced 9U team in the Mustang division) might play NL.

Q: Are travel teams going to come in and dominate the non-travel teams in the divisions?
A: The Select division is meant for players who are at the highest level of ability and experience in their respective age group, whether travel teams or drafted teams. As a league which is among the strongest in Southern California talent-wise, we believe our Select-caliber players are capable of playing against almost anyone in their age group, travel or not. That said, it is possible that travel teams might be stronger, and could have success in the division. This was the case in our Mustang division last year, when one of the Saddleback travel teams that inter-locked with us was undefeated. That said, travel teams that are not strong enough for Select (as described above) would be placed in NL; however, we as a league are very conscious of the implication of dropping a travel team into the NL division, and will do so only to the extent we are very confident that it is a division that will be highly challenging for that travel team. Candidly, we do not want, nor do we expect, a travel team finish at the top of our NL division. At this point, travel teams will not be accepted in the AL division.

Q: Can you explain more of the league's philosophy about the previous question?
A: In our discussions with travel team coaches about taking this direction with the Bronco and Mustang divisions, we believe the motivation travel teams have for playing under this format for the Spring season revolves around two factors: (1) keeping their teams together rather than splitting up for 3-4 months; and (2) continuing to play regularly in Irvine and at Harvard Park, as part of the Irvine Pony community, with and against friends and classmates. While we obviously won't control the approach and philosophy of every team, we believe that the coaches of travel teams that want to enter will recognize the league for what it is -- a facilitator of points (1) and (2) above, and not as an avenue to crush potentially weaker non-travel teams every week. We fully expect such coaches will manage their teams' games accordingly, balance playing time, give more pitchers an opportunity to pitch, display exemplary sportsmanship, etc. Division VPs are discussing this issue with each travel team that signs up with the hope of fostering a competitively balanced Select division. Teams and coaches that demonstrate that they are not "on board" with the philosophy will not be invited back in future seasons.

Q: Can we just put together a group of 12 of our friends and call ourselves a travel team, so that we can play together this spring?
A: No. We are requiring that teams signing up as a travel team be Irvine-based and part of an

established club, or be an established team that is recognized by Irvine Pony and has a history of playing together, which is important in identifying the talent level of the team for division placement. Teams are subject to a minimum Irvine residency threshold, and should be comprised primarily of players who reside in Irvine. Please contact your division VP regarding this issue prior to registering.

Q: Is there a maximum roster size for a travel team that signs up?
A: Travel teams should have at least 11 full-time players on their roster, and not more than 13 in total, subject to limited exception.

Q: My son "plays up" on an older travel team so, even though he's league age for Mustang, his team is registering for Bronco. What can we do?
A: Please contact your division VP to discuss this potential situation if your team or child is affected.

Q: Does being part of a travel team or being an individual player affect my son's chances for playing all-stars?
A: No. Each age level (12U, 11U, 10U and 9U) is expected to have at least one all-star team of players who were selected and/or voted for by the managers in their respective divisions, regardless whether the player was in Select or NL. This could include players selected from travel or non-travel teams. All-star teams could be comprised of Select, NL and AL team players, potentially playing together on the same team. Additionally, it is our expectation that some travel teams will elect to not play all-stars, which should create additional opportunities for non-travel players to represent the league in all-stars.

Q: How will all-star coaches be determined?
A: There will be no change to the all star coach selection process. As in prior years, Irvine Pony selects all-star coaches through a peer-voting process that is intended to identify coaches who best exemplify the spirit of the Irvine Pony values and will provide the all-star teams with excellent coaching and the best chance at success.

Q: My child is not on a travel team and wants to play this spring; what is the process for registering individually?
A: All individual players must register and pay online at www.irvinepony.com, the same as in prior years. They will attend player evaluations, and be drafted onto a non-travel team in NL or AL (or possibly Select) -- in any case based on their baseball experience and ability. Due to expected player count and the limited number of managers, it is possible that divisions will become full, so early registration is strongly encouraged.

Q: Our travel team wants to sign up to play; what is the process for registering teams?
A: Please take the following steps:

1. Confirmation – If you intend to enter your team, please contact the applicable division VP as soon as possible to reserve your team's spot:
    a. Pete Stankovich (Pony/Bronco) – coachpete23@rocketmail.com
    b. Ryan Flanagan (Mustang) – ryanflan@gmail.com
2. Timing – Final rosters must be submitted to the division VP no later than December 14th, and all players must be registered online (and paid) no later than December 16th.
    a. Accepted rosters shall have a minimum of 11 players and maximum of 13 players, subject to certain exceptions.

b. As is the case with all Irvine Pony coaches, travel team coaches must be approved by the Irvine Pony board, and are subject to customary background checks.
c. All players must register and pay online at www.irvinepony.com.
d. In the comments section of the online registration, each player on your team should make it clear that he is on your team, consistent with this example: "TRAVEL – Diamondbacks 10u" *(note: this should ONLY be done for players that have been confirmed on an approved travel team roster)*.

3. Uniforms – Travel teams are expected to furnish their own uniforms

Q: Can I still be a manager or coach for a team in one of the divisions?

A: Yes, please! With or without the inclusion of travel teams, this is always a challenge for every league -- to find enough quality and committed managers and coaches to help guide our young athletes through the season. This year is no different. If you have an interest in coaching a team this spring, please contact your division VP as soon as possible. Ultimately, the number of head coaches who volunteer will determine the number of teams (and thus, number of players) we can accept in registration. In past seasons, we have had to wait-list or turn away players who signed up late due to lack of coaches.