

“Top team or bust”:

In the competitive nature of travel sports, as players mature most of them and their parents desire to make the “top team” in their age division in their club. In too many instances across the country, when a player doesn’t make the top team in their age division in their club they will leave to go somewhere else to make a top team. We see this happening more and more in the 15U, 16U, and 17U age divisions. Prior to high school, players and parents focus more on location of club and playing with friends and classmates. When the players move into high school, they and their parents want to be surrounded by the best possible teammates with the best possible coaching in the best possible situation. Often, but not always, parents and players feel they need to be the top team in order to experience a great year. Directors across the country call this thinking the “top team syndrome” - where parents and players are essentially saying “If I don't make a top team in my club, I need to go somewhere else in order to get better and be seen by college coaches.” It is the reality that all directors in all sports (basketball, soccer, volleyball, lacrosse, etc) deal with.

In our club, we are always asking “What defines a successful season and what do the players and parents really want and need?”

Based on our experience, we feel a player and a family will have a great season if these key benchmarks are present throughout.

- 1) Coaching is welcoming and inspiring while instilling confidence and motivation. We pride ourselves are making sure our coaches are working to provide these hard to measure intangibles. We expect our coaches to make our athletes feel welcomed, inspired, confident and motivated. Certainly, the coach is the biggest key in the experience of any athlete.
- 2) The player is competing with players of similar experience level, motivations, skill and goals. Players want to play with other players who want to work hard, be good teammates, and find success on and off the court. There is a premium in knowing who your teammates are and trusting the selection process through experience and tryouts.
- 3) The player is placed in a situation where they will be asked to grow mentally, athletically, spiritually and socially. Players need to have substantial roles within the team in these areas to develop throughout the year. Being on the “top team” with a very small role does not lead to much growth in any area. Growth comes from being asked to perform – on and off the court – over an extended period of time.
- 4) The player is placed on a team where they work hard and find success on the scoreboard. In all of our experience, we have never found a group of players and families who have had a good season if the team loses. Every team loses but losing too much – especially on top team – leads to disharmony and strife. A key to a successful season is winning just as often as possible while still being pushed by opponents.

Essentially, a player needs to play for the best possible coach with the best possible teammates having the largest role possible on a team that wins as often as possible. In our experience, a player has a great season if this happens. Being on a top team does NOT guarantee any of this. We have seen poorly coached top teams throughout our area who have a wide range of ages and experience levels within the players and where some players sit on the sideline all season long and the team loses...and loses...and loses. We see this year after year.

When players and parents are considering their options, and especially as it relates to staying on a 2nd team in our current club or moving to a top team somewhere else, they should look for consistency of the program, consistency of leadership, consistency of development, consistency of success on and off the court.

Here is a look at our Stars 2nd and 3rd teams compared to other TOP teams in our immediate area. We pulled this information directly from AES and looked at the other top clubs in our upstate area (Greenville, Spartanburg, Anderson, Western NC, etc). We studied coaches, rosters, success on the scoreboard, tournament schedules. Anything we felt we could measure, we did. Again, these are not our top teams. These teams are our 2nd and in some cases our 3rd teams in our age divisions.

Team name:	Nat. Rank:	W-L record:	Tot. matches:	W %:
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14u Age Division:

Stars 14 Bridgette (our 2 nd team)	505	40-27	67	60%
14 Top team from area club	1531	13-15	28	46%
14 Top team from area club	553	28-13	41	68%
14 Top team from area club	1593	19-35	54	35%
14 Top team from area club	952	22-12	34	64%

15u Age Division:

Stars 15 Sarah (our 2 nd team)	237	40-23	63	63%
15 Top team from area club	656	29-33	62	46%
15 Top team from area club	2278	14-30	44	32%
15 Top team from area club	1250	22-39	61	36%
Stars 15 Jimmy (our 3 rd team)	396	43-20	63	68%

16u Age Division:

Stars 16 Taylor (our 2 nd team)	218	52-23	75	69%
16 Top team from area club	989	30-30	60	50%
16 Top team from area club	1004	17-12	29	58%
16 Top team from area club	294	36-12	48	75%
16 Top team from area club	795	26-29	55	47%

17U Age Division:

Stars 17 Katie (our 2 nd team)	555	35-29	64	55%
17 Top team from area club	1453	14-13	27	52%

Before we look at the coaching component and the tournament schedules, it is important to note that our 2nd teams train with and against our "top team" each and every week for 6 months. Our commitment to having both teams train together and be exposed to both coaches is an invaluable benefit of being on one of our top 2 teams. Often, our 2nd teams will also train with the 2nd teams (and sometimes top teams) in higher age divisions. For example, our 16 Taylor and 17 Katie teams trained with our 18 Corey team (top 18s team) during the season. This opportunity to train alongside a large group of other athletes who have similar goals is essential to growth.

Tournament Schedule:

We have created a tournament schedule for our 2nd teams that rival (if not surpass) the top teams from other area clubs. We have the very competitive SAVL power league events supplemented with tournaments such as The Beast of the Southeast, JVA World Championships, The Big South Qualifier, The Mideast Qualifier, K2 Elite Challenge, Showdown at the Smokies, The AAU National Championships, and others. The tournament schedule also includes the opportunity to qualify for the USAV National Championships which 3 of our 2nd teams won the bid for this season. For competition and exposure (without unnecessary expense), our 2nd team schedules compare favorably with top team schedules from area clubs.

So, is it really "top team" or bust in our Stars club?

We work very hard and are blessed that our 2nd teams consistently are having a "top team experience". We feel our families do not feel the need to leave our club if they make our 2nd team. We are providing our 2nd teams a top team caliber coach, a top team training environment, a top team tournament schedule and enjoying more on court success than other area clubs top teams.

As a reminder, our 2nd, 3rd, even 4th teams outperform some other clubs' top teams – and certainly routinely beat their counterpart. Our Stars teams won 15 of the 22 divisions at the SAVL championships the last two years and our 2nd/3rd teams won over 20 tournaments by themselves (including a couple Palmetto Region Championships)! Now that we are playing primarily in the SAVL, our typical competition will be much more demanding than some of the other local clubs.

Not only are our 2nd and 3rd teams competitive, they are also coached by coaches who are very passionate about this sport. We have great coaches who coach our 2nd, 3rd and 4th teams. Our staff, although not perfect, is truly remarkable. You don't have to make a top team in our club to be coached by a college coach!

Here are some numbers to remember while trying out and deciding to play with us or another club.

In South Carolina the past 6 years, our 1st, 2nd, and 3rd teams have all well fared against other clubs 1st team:

- 85% of the time our 1st teams have defeated other Club's 1st teams.
- 60% of the time our 2nd teams have defeated other Clubs 1st Teams.
- 60% of the time our 3rd teams have defeated other Clubs 2nd teams.

Are our Stars teams really that good?:

Our very talented 2nd and 3rd teams are full of players who start for their school teams. Our top teams typically are replete with the "best player" from the school team. So, if a player (your daughter) isn't the best player from the school team, she may not make the top team for Upward Stars. Regardless, Stars is still a great place for her to learn to grow as a person and athlete.

For Upward Stars, typically each of our age divisions will have numerous teams all based on experience, skill level and other factors. Some of our teams may have multiple ages within teams – again based on available talent, the skill of the player and her level of experience. The plan is for the tryout process to determine which team each player should be placed on in order to best allow her to develop and grow while still competing at the highest possible level. We have

Whether club volleyball, middle school basketball, or the high school math team, we hope everyone realizes that teams with 8-11 players will never have players with the exact same skill sets or experience levels. It is similar to what many of you experienced this fall with your school teams. Some players are “better” than others, “more experienced” than others. We hope the gaps between the “best” and “least experienced” are smaller at the club level but we always have the “top” player and the “lowest” player on a team. That is the nature of team sports. It is a great opportunity for both involved.

But all our Stars teams strive to be the most competitive teams in the southeast.