



WORLD SPORTS ALLIANCE

World Sports Alliance primarily works with wrestling teams to put together trips to destinations like China.

The Wide World of Sports

Student Sporting Groups See More than Competitors

by Lisa Thompson

Athletics are a huge part of many people's lives, particularly for those involved with children or young adults who fill their days by participating on sports teams that offer them a world of opportunities. Kids can turn sports into a college education, into a career and, in many cases, provide the once-in-a-lifetime experience of international travel.

For the average sports team at a middle or high school, travel is limited to the local or regional area. They hop on the school bus and they're off to compete before returning home a few hours later. There also can be the occasional away-from-home tournament that will include

a couple nights in a hotel.

But, what about those schools that want to mix in a little bit more to their athletic experience? There is a growing trend among sporting teams of taking competition-based trips that add the element of not just travel, but also of experiencing a new culture as they compete internationally.

LOTS TO SEE OUTSIDE OF THE ARENA

Wade Genova with World Sports Alliance in Colorado Springs, Colorado, specializes in providing wrestling teams with trips that will enrich the student's lives. "We have strong ties with U.S.

Sports National Governing Bodies [U.S. Olympic Committee member organizations] as well as with sport federations worldwide. This allows us to set up sports tours where our participants can be confident they will receive a good—and appropriate—level of competition."

Genova and his company make it easy for wrestling teams to travel and compete on an international level. In fact, Genova's contacts run so deep that they are able to arrange competitions in most sports on six continents.

"Our sports groups are looking for good competition with great sightseeing. They want to see the famous sites, have fun and make friends."

Currently, World Sports Alliance's most requested destinations include China, Greece and Italy. These trips take young athletes, enhance their sporting experience with added levels of competition and training that they wouldn't receive otherwise, and create travel memories that won't soon be forgotten. How many young wrestlers can say that they and their teammates stood on the Great Wall of China?

SPORTS AND EDUCATION PROVIDE BALANCE

Whether a sports team is directly affiliated with a school or if it's independent of the academic institution, tour operators understand that it isn't just about the sport when dealing with student-athletes. They know that regardless of the group, there needs to be an educational component to packages to ensure that they are providing the most well-rounded experience possible.

Eric McAleer of Excel International Sports in Sykesville, Maryland, specializes in European sports travel for 11- to 23-year-olds. The company works with high school teams, collegiate teams and recreational teams in soccer, ice hockey, golf, swimming, basketball and lacrosse. As McAleer said, "For 10 years Excel International Sports has been customizing soccer tours to Europe. Soccer is a passion for the people of Europe, and for our staff."

With that passion comes a drive to provide the best tour possible. As an added educational component, Excel International Sports includes a community service project in the European destinations the teams visit. This experience gives the student-athletes the opportunity to learn more about the culture of the country they are visiting and give back in a meaningful and lasting way. While the competition is the driving force behind the trip, voluntourism elements can create a longer-lasting impression on young minds.

In working with a professional who has a passion for your team's sport, there is the added benefit of their intimate knowledge and those little extras they can offer. "We believe one of the reasons for our success is the quality of the people who assist every team in creating and operating their sports tour experiences," said McAleer. "Each of these individuals is committed to making each



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Today's sports team travel packages include a combination of training, competition, educational and sightseeing opportunities.

tour a lifetime memory."

PROFESSIONALISM AND SAFETY ARE KEY

While professionals like McAleer work to create a memorable travel experience, they also are focused on the safety of the group, both from the travel stand point and the competition aspect. Operators have the experience and tools necessary to take the proper amount of precautions for the safety of the student-athletes. And, with tours including competition, there is the added element of possible injury that makes working with a professional tour operator even more important.

McAleer knows all too well how to be prepared for just such an event. "We have European Sports Travel specialists assisting throughout the whole booking process. We also provide a specialty sports injury insurance policy to all participating players."

Tour operators like McAleer and Genova add a lot to a sports team's overall experience. They can take teams to incredible destinations. They offer the combination of a passion for not only the sport, but also for travel. They offer the safety and security of an expert in both worlds—sport and travel planning—to give the coach and the parents peace of mind when sending their young athlete on such a journey. But, most of all, they make it easy.

"A coach can organize his or her own sports tour if they wish, but they will find out it is a lot of work and the amount of money they save, if any, probably isn't worth the time," Genova said. "Tour operators do a lot more research into destinations than someone not in the business probably would ever do. Using a good tour operator will get a client more bang for the buck and provide them with a more enjoyable and stress-free tour." ❁