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HEADLINE: Gas prices taking the travel out of teams;  
\$4 gas has changed how - and how often - youth sports teams go off to games and tournaments

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For the more than 35,000 kids and their parents involved with Minnesota Youth Soccer Association traveling teams, getting to the game has suddenly become as challenging as the game itself

Since the season began May 5, many teams have taken to renting buses or large vans and encouraged families to carpool -- anything to take the sting out of making long road trips with gas near \$4 a gallon. Some teams even stay in hotels between road games to save on mileage costs

The "whole playing field of soccer is changing," said Bob Shannon, boys traveling director for the Roseville-based North Suburban Soccer Association. "The way gas prices will affect traveling youth teams is going to be dramatic." Other youth sports with traveling teams such as baseball and lacrosse are also feeling the pinch. A few baseball teams have balked at playing in next month's Gopher State Tournament of Champions, saying they "can't afford to play in it" because of gas prices, said Dawson Blanck, senior baseball director with the Minnesota Youth Athletic Services

The organization, based in Columbia Heights, oversees 400 traveling baseball teams. A team from St. Francis already has declined a tournament spot, citing gas prices, Blanck said

In Minnetonka, a Senior Babe Ruth League team has missed three of its four travel games because players, many of whom drive, said they didn't want to pay extra for gas, said coach Jon Guy. One of those road trips was to Apple Valley -- 60 miles roundtrip

But it's traveling youth soccer teams, which sometimes travel hundreds of miles for regular-season games, that are really feeling the squeeze at the pump like never before

Youth soccer coach Kevin Slator complained for years about distances his White Bear Lake teams traveled for games -- sometimes 200 miles for round trips, to Chippewa Falls or Eau Claire, Wis. He predicted a few months ago, "If gas hits \$4 per gallon, each of those 200-mile trips in the family minivan will cost soccer families \$40 just in gasoline. It's wasteful and unnecessary." Traveling teams from the Duluth area, which play nearly half of their games in the Twin Cities, now consider staying at hotels if their teams play away games on consecutive days because it's cheaper than driving back and forth, said Dave Geary, executive director of the Arrowhead Youth Soccer Association in Duluth

Two weeks ago, a Wayzata girls soccer team rented a 15-person van to drive players to a game in Indiana because "for the first time, gas prices are an issue," said Steve Hollander, president of the Wayzata Soccer Club. Rochester teams have rented buses for years, usually for \$400, or \$20 per person, said Candace Daley, executive director of the Minnesota Youth Soccer Association, a statewide governing body

"Rochester teams did it in the past for the camaraderie and to relieve the stress of driving in traffic," she said. "Now, teams from other areas are looking at it as a good deal."

No other options

A metro-area Youth Lacrosse of Minnesota league for middle school girls has split its teams into east and west divisions, to eliminate long travel, said Krista Dean-Klinger, league vice president. "We haven't discussed gas prices," she said. "We just don't want parents, or umpires who are high school kids, to travel. But the rising gas prices make that an even smarter decision." But in soccer, even as gas prices have increased, so have the number of competitive teams, Daley said. Players for traveling teams turned up in record numbers this year, with several hundred more participating than last year, Daley said

In some communities, traveling soccer is the only game in town. Not all communities offer the option of recreational soccer programs in addition to traveling soccer leagues, which are more competitive

Some of those traveling leagues, run by volunteers but with highly paid coaches, already can be extremely pricey, costing participants thousands of dollars just to play. The additional transportation costs from higher gas prices may be too much for less affluent families of talented kids

"We have so many kids coming in ... immigrants from other countries who have a real passion for the game," Shannon said. "Those kids playing in our leagues is great for the sport and great for the community. But what happens to those kids now?" Soccer is the sport for everybody. Even in our community, you've got kids on free or reduced lunches at school. We want to keep these traveling leagues competitive, but the gas prices are making it tougher." The Minnesota Youth Soccer Association occasionally moves leagues from one regional district to another, but this year it was cognizant of gas prices when placing teams. Slator's White Bear Lake team was moved into a different district and now plays traveling games in places such as Maple Grove, only 40 miles away

Can't move everybody

With nearly 2,200 competitive teams in Minnesota this summer, and tournament play beginning in mid-July, parents are hoping there can be a solution that can cut down on travel during the gas crunch

It can't come quickly enough, said Donna Lutinen, whose 13-year-old daughter and her Stillwater Swarm team played in a June tournament in Duluth. Her 19-year-old daughter is a coach whose Stillwater team played a league in Chippewa Falls last Wednesday

"I'm sympathetic, but we try not to move teams all the time," Daley said. "I haven't heard (complaints) from anybody this season." Dave Geary said he has not seen any drop in the demand for competitive traveling teams from Duluth this year. His son, Jesse, who will be a freshman at Macalester College this fall, played for three seasons on a traveling youth soccer team based in Plymouth. Jesse, now 18, and his father would make the 300-mile round trip four times a week for practices and games. Gas was \$1.59 per gallon then

"With gas prices over \$4 per gallon, it's a different game now," Dave Geary said. "But we made a commitment. Even as gas prices rose, it was worth it

"The three years we traveled were a wonderful opportunity to get to know our child. We loved that time and we miss it

"There are some things you can't put a price tag on."