



Starting a NICA team

Road map and considerations for new teams

So you're thinking about starting a NICA team!? That's **awesome!**

Start with WHY you want to be a NICA coach. If your goal is to create an amazing place for young people to find the sport of mountain biking, meet new people, and develop them into great adults, then NICA is the right fit for you. Make sure you really think about your WHY before going down this path as a coach. If you know your WHY, being a NICA coach can be one of the *most rewarding experiences in your life*. Are you in? Check out our road map for starting a NICA team by following the steps below.

*The goal of this document is to help you start your journey as a NICA coach and team leader. Your league director, national staff, and fellow coaches are here to help you. If you need support please use the **NICA Coach Help Desk**.*

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Reach out to your league director

The very first step to the process is to email your **league director** and let them know you are interested in starting a NICA team.

1. Find your league and league directors contact information [here](#).
2. If there isn't a team in your area already, your league director will invite you to register a new team in NICA's registration system, Pit Zone.

Register your new team with Pit Zone

Pit Zone is the NICA registration platform and is where all coaches, student-athletes, and team volunteers register. Coaches and student-athletes use Pit Zone to pay fees and complete training.

1. Once you have emailed your league director you will get a link by email to register the new team
 2. You will become the default “Team Director” (note: if this is not the role you will be taking on, you can switch it in the future)
 3. Pit Zone registration steps include the following:
 1. Input your team and personal information
PRO TIP: Make sure to use your *full legal name* so your background check process will be smooth
 2. Complete the background check by clicking the link through Pit Zone
Background checks are completed by Sterling Volunteers and automatically report back to the Pit Zone. For more information about the background check, please see the national website [HERE](#)
 3. Sign the waivers and code of conduct
 4. Pay the required fees in Pit Zone: these include a personal coach membership fee and a team membership fee
 5. Become a level 1 NICA coach by completing the steps in the next section
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Become a Level 1 coach

The **NICA Education Center** is designed to give you the knowledge and skills that you need to become a great NICA coach. You don’t need to be an awesome mountain bike rider to start a mountain bike team. The characteristics athletes and families are looking for are patience, enthusiasm, clear communication and a desire to create great programs for young people.

All requirements to become a level 1 coach can be completed online! This process is smooth and easy to follow. Plan on spending 2-3 hours on the courses the first year.

To start your training, access the NICA Education Center through your coach profile in the Pit Zone:

1. From **Pit Zone** click the white “Courses, Resources & Benefits” button
2. Complete the level 1 coach requirements in any order
 - o NICA Philosophy, Safety, and Risk Management Training (required annually)
 - o CDC Heads Up Concussion Training (required annually)
 - o Athlete Abuse Awareness Training (required every two years)
 - o NICA License Level 1 Coach Course (required every two years)

RESOURCES: [NICA Coach education requirements](#) | [Quick-start guide to navigating coach courses, resources, & benefits](#)

Note that all new teams will need a level 3 coach within two years. Level 3 coaches receive training on all the knowledge, skills, and abilities to be a great head coach. If you plan to be the head coach for your team, seek out the **NICA Online Leaders’ Summits**, your league’s leaders’ summits / coach retreat, and On-the-Bike skills clinics. The training to become a great NICA coach is available online and within your league.

Become a coach...continued..

If you see “**License Level: 1**” in your Pit Zone account

Congratulations! You are now a full fledged level 1 coach!

You can start to invite more coaches to the team.

- Spring leagues can start inviting coaches on September 15th
- Fall leagues can start inviting coaches on March 1st

If you are within the season you can invite student-athletes and begin working with student-athletes!

- Spring leagues can start inviting student-athletes on October 15th
- Fall leagues can start inviting student-athletes on April 1st

If you see “**License Level: None**” in your Pit Zone account

This status simply means you missed something, or the background check process has not yet been completed. You will need to ensure everything is completed and you are showing as level 1 before joining the team for practices/rides.

If you need support at any time in this process, use the [NICA Coach Help Desk](#)

Define a vision for the team

Ask yourself and your fellow coaches (if you have them already) the following questions to **define your vision**:

1. What does success look like for our team in our first year?
2. How will we make sure that we are creating a program that is intentionally inclusive and fun?
3. How will we ensure that student-athletes are able to reach their cycling goals in our program?
4. Why do I want to coach?

Draft your team vision

Once you have discussed these questions with your fellow coaches or reflected on them individually, write the vision down.

- Use this vision statement when you talk to people about the team.
- Use this vision statement on your recruitment materials and in your team welcome email.

The **most successful teams** put an emphasis on participation, camaraderie, and group goals, not performance or individual achievement.



Determine what type of team you will be in year one

One of the decisions to make when starting a new team is whether you will be a **school-based** team or a **composite** team.

Composite teams

Composite teams include all of the middle and highschool riders within a geographic area (e.g. public school, independent school, homeschool, etc). Composites are intended to be temporary until school-based teams can be formed. You can start with a composite team and help seed school-based teams for the future. Many former composite teams still work together once they have become school based to share resources, coaches, and community.

School-based teams

For the vast majority of communities, school-based teams are the best way to open doors for the most new riders. Having a team at a school allows for students to be part of the school community and helps the team recruit within the school. Splitting composite teams into school-based teams can really help with recruitment and build connections. Schools provide the greatest access to youth across the country and help more athletes see mountain biking as an available option!

Recruit coaches/volunteers

Find potential **coaches** and team **volunteers** who understand the mission, vision and values of NICA and who support the vision you and your fellow coaches have defined for your team.

1. Talk about your new team to everyone!
2. Collect names and email addresses of anyone who is interested in coaching / volunteering
3. Invite them to be a coach in Pit Zone from your team dashboard
4. Put their contact information into your team communication tool (Google Groups, TeamSnap, SportsEngine, etc)
5. Directly ask parents of potential student-athletes if they are interested in coaching, volunteering, or riding with the team at practice (remember that anyone who rides with the team at practice must be a fully licensed level 1 NICA coach)
6. If parents are not interested in coaching or riding with the team, directly ask them to support the team in another way. Use our resource as a guide to volunteer asks: **Tasks associated with running a team**

Remember that *you don't need to do everything in year one*. It may take time to build out your program with all of the roles and responsibilities; start small and develop more volunteers as the team grows!

Begin recruiting interested kids and their parents

So you've started a team! Now it's time to bring new riders and volunteers into your **team community**. There are a lot of ways to recruit, and lots of resources to help.

1. Access team recruitment and team management resources in the NICA Education Center (enter via Pit Zone)
 1. Recruitment flier templates
 2. Team info sheet templates
 3. Welcome communication to athletes and families
 4. Team sign-up form template
 2. Use passive recruitment strategies like...
 1. Post flyers at bike shops, community centers, schools, trailheads, churches, pediatrician offices, etc
 2. Create a social media presence and communicate your team values and how to get registered
 3. Put yard signs on busy streets, near schools, and at trailheads
 3. Use targeted or individual recruitment strategies like...
 1. Present at school activity fairs
 2. Talk to parents and athletes you see on the trail, have a sticker, card, or flier to share with them in your riding bag
 3. Talk to local bike shops about what you are doing so they can help you recruit
 4. Talk to local pediatricians and pediatric dentists in the area, they are always looking for ways to keep kids active
 4. **Make sure that all of your recruitment activities collect the names and email addresses of the parents / caregivers. Once you have the contact information, invite them to register in Pit Zone immediately!**
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Develop a season and practice plans

The NICA Education Center has lots of resources to help you **plan your season** and **individual practices**. You don't need to reinvent the wheel.

1. Determine a practice schedule
 1. Many teams practice 2 days a week
 2. The max number of practices allowed per week is 4
 3. Two weeknight practices works well for fall leagues because there is enough sunlight to practice after school and work
 4. One weeknight and one weekend practice can work better for spring leagues that start practice in winter
 5. Consistency is key to help families and athletes
2. Early season practice needs to focus on skills instruction and development
 1. You should not ride trails with your athletes until you have had time to assess their abilities and readiness for trail riding
 2. Focus on skill development and performance will follow
3. Practice progression throughout the season
 1. When practice moves to trails, progress slowly
 2. Start by building endurance and combining skills while focusing on great fundamentals
 3. As you get closer to race dates, increase the intensity of the practice and spend time working on race specific skills (passing, nutrition, pacing, feed zone, goal setting)
 4. Continue to set aside time to work on skills and create opportunities for team building (social rides, BBQ, ice cream ride, etc)

Season and practice plans, continued...

4. Fall leagues can start regular season practice on July 1st
 1. Preseason activities can take place from April 1st - June 30th
5. Spring leagues can start regular practice on December 1st
 1. Preseason activities can take place from October 15th - November 30th
6. The season officially ends two weeks after the last race weekend in your league
 1. You can stop practices after the last event of the season
 2. OR, you can continue to practice up to two weeks after the last league race / event

Identify the roles and duties for your team

Every NICA team needs a **community** of coaches and volunteers to run smoothly.

In the beginning, one or two coaches / volunteers may be able to take on all of the responsibilities needed to manage a team. As your team grows, you will need to bring more coaches and volunteers in to support you. A group of dedicated coaches and volunteers can act as your leadership team and help identify the vision for the team and help solve team issues. There are a lot of resources available to help you run and manage your team in the NICA Education Center, which you can access through Pit Zone by clicking “Courses, Resources, and Benefits” from your Pit Zone home page.

Use the Team Management resources* to...

1. Identify and define team roles
2. Plan your budget
3. Create team code of conduct using templates
4. Create welcome letters using templates
5. Create recruitment materials and flyers using templates

**There are some resources in both Spanish and English*

Team communication

Clear and consistent **team communication** is helpful for coaches, athletes, and families.

Find a system of communication that works for you and stick to it, for at least the whole season. Switching systems midseason can add confusion. Email and text messaging can work for adults but typically doesn't work well for student-athletes. Especially because coaches should not have any one-to-one direct communication with athletes.

Think about **TeamSnap** or other **team management apps** for setting up a way to communicate with your team. These apps can help you streamline communication and keep things organized. Many team management apps include chat, scheduling, email, invoicing and more. If the team is not able to pay for an app the first year, consider identifying a free app that manages communication but doesn't allow for direct one-to-one communication.

A **weekly email** with the practice locations and times, reminders, and upcoming events is a great way to start your week. Using Teamsnap or other apps are a great way to communicate quickly about changes to the plan in case of poor weather or an emergency.

Avoid feeling like you need to communicate in 20 different ways. Pick **one system of communication** and stick to it for the team. This will make it easier for you and families in the long run.

Develop a team budget and establish team fees

A **team budget** doesn't need to be super complicated or huge, but programs do need money to create great environments for athletes.

Identify how much money your team will need to operate and then consider charging a team fee that will cover the operating costs for the team. This provides you with a solid foundation and consistent funding structure. You can offer partial or full scholarships to families that need support, but a majority of families will be able to pay the team fee. Many youth sports charge thousands of dollars in team fees while many NICA teams charge around \$100-200.

You can find sample team budgets in the NICA Education Center in the Team Management Resources.

RESOURCES: [Managing Team Finances](#)

Develop a fundraising/sponsorship plan

Fundraising can support larger team needs like custom tents, equipment, and scholarships. Fundraising and sponsorship take time and effort. Recruit a new coach with this skill set or find someone on your team who can manage the fundraising and sponsorship.

1. Start by identifying team needs that cannot be met by team fees
2. Connect with your league director to see if there are any league-wide fundraising opportunities or for ideas on what other teams in your region have done to successfully raise team funds
3. Draft sponsorship letters using templates found in the NICA Education Center

Think about your team identity

Part of the fun of starting a youth mountain bike team is the opportunity to create a **team identity** and “brand” – essentially, the look and feel of your team from an outside perspective. This involves everything from your team logo to social media.

A strong brand or identity for your team can help create a sense of community and unity, and serves as a rallying point for your riders and families. When designing your team logo, brand, and identity, be intentional and inclusive. Recruit graphic designers or folks with expertise in your community. Invest some time into the process! Here are some tips as you get started.

Team logo

Your team logo should be appropriate for a youth development organization. Your team is made up of riders of varying abilities, backgrounds, and genders, so avoid a logo that is polarizing or lopsided in how it represents your team. If you are a school-based team, you will want to use your school logo; this helps athletes feel like they are a part of the school community, and is great for recruitment. If you are a composite team, create a logo that represents your area.

LOGO PRO-TIPS:

1. Keep it simple, less is more with logos

2. Avoid using too many colors in your logo - this can keep printing costs down for t-shirts

Photos

You'll need photos to share the stoke for your team on social media, flyers, presentations, and maybe even a new team website. Be thoughtful about what you communicate when you share images. Reach out within your community to see if anyone has great photography skills or equipment to help you capture awesome moments.

PHOTO PRO-TIPS:

1. Focus on group photos instead of individual riders
2. Avoid podium pictures
3. Focus on including diversity in your images, meaning not all one ability, gender, age, or race

Website and social media presence

A simple team website can be effective for sharing basic information about your team, the league and NICA. Social media allows you to share real-time updates, invite your community to events, and showcase the fun throughout your season. Creating a positive online presence for your team can be a great way to recruit and drum up interest.

Jersey/kit design

Again, remember that your team covers a wide range of ages, abilities, and genders. Design a kit/jersey that will work for your whole community. Teams often work with several custom cycling clothing manufacturers (i.e. Borah, Podiumwear, Pactimo) that offer discounts for NICA student-athletes and coaches. You can learn more about these companies by accessing the Coach Benefits section within the NICA Education Center. Many teams start with a simple activewear t-shirt as a team jersey. This can keep costs down for families and the team.

Other apparel and swag

There are *tons* of opportunities to create additional branded items that are fun for riders and families – from hats to sweatpants to car magnets, there are about a million ways to show your stoke for your team! You can reach out to a local screen printer or work with an online vendor to create these items - the sky's the limit! Ask riders and families what they would use/purchase – they will have great ideas and possibly have connections to vendors.

Other useful resources

- **NICA Handbook** - The guidebook for NICA teams and league events. It includes the code of conduct, race rules, and league specific guidance. Team leaders should be familiar with the handbook content.
- **NICA Coach Help Desk** - The coach help desk is a place for NICA coaches to get support on all things related to coach education, licensing, registration, etc.
- **NICA Trailhead Coaching Blog** - The Trailhead is a space for NICA coaches to gather and gain knowledge, share stories, and hear the latest NICA coach news.

Glossary of terms

NICA - Pronounced with a long “I” sound, stands for the National Interscholastic Cycling Association. NICA is a national organization made up of leagues from around the country to promote youth development through mountain biking.

National staff - The group of people who work for NICA to support programming, coaching, events, and league operations; coaches, teams and league staff; and registration, business and administration functions.

League Director - The director is responsible for overseeing league operations and promoting and maintaining the organization’s core values and culture.

Pit Zone - NICA’s registration system for coaches and athletes. Pit Zone is the starting point for everyone who is involved in NICA. Coaches link to their coach education through Pit Zone. Families register their athletes through Pit Zone.

Coach - Any adult who rides with the team at practice or has regular contact with student-athletes must be a fully licensed NICA coach. All coaches start as level 1 and can advance to level 2 and level 3 with more training.

Season - NICA leagues can be either a spring season or a fall season. Spring leagues begin practice in winter and race in the spring. Fall leagues begin practice in summer and race in the fall. Check with your league to learn about your official season start date.

NICA Education Center - Accessed through Pit Zone, you can find NICA coach courses, coach and team management resources, and coach benefits in the NICA Education Center.