

Composite team expansion playbook

A guide for growth: when to split and expand composite teams

It can be scary and intimidating to split a large and successful team. **Splitting a growing team is a good thing! It means** that you've created something so amazing that it needs to grow.

Expanding creates teams that are able to serve more kids and get more kids on bikes. Creating new teams changes communities and gives athletes access to the transformative power of NICA. Every youth should be a part of a thriving and engaged cycling community. We have the power to help ensure that vision is a reality.

This document serves to break down the process of successful composite team expansion, with Wisconsin's Madison West team as a case study. Each team is different, and each story of a team expansion will be unique, but there are common key strategies to execute a successful team expansion.

At the end of this document, you'll also find a simple **TEAM EXPANSION CHECKLIST** which guides you through the process and links to relevant content within this playbook.

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Photo by Aaron Puttcam





This document uses the story of the Madison West High School MTB team to demonstrate the trajectory of a composite team expansion. Follow their journey in the blue boxes throughout this playbook...



CASE STUDY

How do you create sustainable growth?

The Madison West High School MTB team was founded in 2014 with eight athletes and two coaches. By the end of the first season, the team grew to 14 athletes and six coaches...

The team was really pleased with the growth! After that season, word started to spread around the Madison area MTB community. Athletes and families wanted to join but their schools didn't have a team yet. The leadership of the Madison West team decided to add a composite team to provide a space for new athletes. The Madison Westside Composite team was born. The teams consisted of athletes from different high school attendance zones (Madison West, Madison Memorial, Verona Area Schools) and a local private school, Edgewood High School.

The team grew quickly over the next couple of years. The athletes from different schools practiced together, their coaches planned together, and they operated as one large team with a shared jersey design that was a combination of all of the school's colors.

However, **managing the growing teams** became challenging for the head coach. Would they need to cap their registration? Would they need to turn kids away from the team in order to keep things manageable? Would new families not want to join the team because of long drives to practice venues?

Team leadership discussed a strategy: in order to grow the teams sustainably, they decided to expand and split into more teams. Madison West was already associated with their school as a club sport. The schools within the Westside Composite were not, and were growing more slowly. By splitting the composite into school-based teams, they hypothesized that the teams could grow faster: athletes would be excited to join a team associated with their school, to have a team with their own jersey and own identity...

The four teams had a combined roster of 230 plus athletes in their most recent season. If the teams would not have split and expanded in their early years, there is a strong likelihood that the Verona and Madison Memorial teams would not have grown at the rate they have. They would have not developed strong team leadership and head coaches because they could have relied on the existing head coach and team director. The teams would not have been able to serve the population of kids in the community that needed a NICA team.



Understanding when to expand

It can be difficult to determine when a composite team needs to split into multiple teams. NICA's vision (every youth is empowered to be a part of a thriving and engaged cycling community) means that our goal is to create programs that every young person can access. If our teams are getting so big that we don't want to recruit any more, or our athletes have to travel long distances to practice, it is time to expand into multiple teams. We want to serve as many communities as possible across the country.

Examples of when a team should expand

- School-based enrollment grows
- Travel to practice is well beyond the average for the region
- Team management becomes too difficult due to team size
- Registration is capped but there is still interest in the team

CASE STUDY

Why isn't a team growing?

Coaches wondered why the Westside Composite team wasn't growing as fast as Madison West. One hypothesis was that the Madison West team was seen more as a "real" high school sport because they had their own jerseys, they used their name as the team name, and they could hold meetings at their high school because they were an official school club. The teams decided that it was time to expand again to help the Madison Memorial and Verona Area Schools teams grow. They decided to get jerseys made for those two teams, they registered the new teams in Pit Zone, and made significant connections with the high school athletic department and administration.

Identify what success look like for your new teams

Define a vision for the teams

Ask yourself and your fellow coaches the following questions to define your vision:

- 1. What does success look like for our team(s) in our first year?
- 2. What does success look like in 3-5 years?
- 3. How will we make sure that we are creating new teams that are intentionally inclusive and fun?
- 4. How will we ensure that student-athletes can reach their cycling goals?
- 5. Why do I want to coach?

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 new teams.
- Use this vision statement on your recruitment materials and in your teams' welcome email.

The most successful teams emphasize participation, camaraderie, and group goals, not performance or individual achievement.

Draft your goals for the new teams

Why is there a need for team expansion?

- Has the team growth stagnated?
- Are families required to travel long distances to attend practice?
- Have you stopped recruiting because team management has become too difficult?
- Do you have a critical mass of student-athletes from one high school?
- Are you unable to effectively serve athletes and families across your whole geographic area
- Are there local families and coaches that show signs of leadership and a desire to create another team?

Team expansion is a sign of success and it'll be important to track what continued success looks like post-expansion.



Example Team Goals

Depending on why you decided, or were compelled, to expand you should track success based on your reasons to create a new team(s).

- Will you reach more student-athletes in new geographic areas?
- Will families travel shorter distances to get to practice?
- Will team management become more reasonable for volunteers?
- Will the school team build a relationship with the school and recruit new athletes?

Reason for Expansion	Team Goals	How will you track the team goal?
Participation	# of athletes in teams grows collectively	Final Pit Zone roster for teams
Retention	Athletes from original team return and new team grows	Year over year rosters
Engagement	Athletes, families, and coaches respond positively to the new teams	End of season survey & practice attendance
Participation in league events	# of athletes participating in league races and events increases	Race and event registration numbers

Your teams may take a few years to become a reality. Keep track of why you expanded and continue to reflect and adjust your plan based on the needs of your families, athletes, and coaches. Base your goals on the reason you expanded in the first place.

Determine what type of teams will be created out of the expansion

As you think about your expansion, consider whether you will be creating a new school-based team or another composite team.

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 students to be part of the school community and helps the team recruit within the school. Splitting composite teams into school-based teams can help with recruitment and building connections. Schools provide the greatest access to youth across the country and help more athletes see mountain biking as an available option!

An additional composite team

If you need to create an additional composite team, what will the new geographical boundaries be? It is really important to define clear boundaries for the new teams. You will need to collaborate with your league director and any other teams in the area to make sure that the boundaries are logical and clear to all parties involved. Make it easy for new families and existing families to understand which team is their team.

Build trust and cohesion with the new teams

Building trusting relationships with the athletes, coaches, and families will be key to creating thriving new teams. Championship coaches all have one thing in common, they make building relationships with their athletes, coaches, and families a top priority.

The new teams will be intimidating to some of your athletes, coaches, and families. Be clear with them about the reasons for the new teams, celebrate the need for expanding the teams, and help guide them to the benefits of the new teams. Be honest about the difficulty of changes and preview some of the growing pains that may occur in the following years.

Focus on celebrating the new teams. It means that they were so good that the original team needed to grow. Some athletes and families might perceive they are losing something by moving from one team to a new expanded team. Help them see the opportunity they have to create a new team that will serve even more kids in their community.



Create systems and structures that are repeatable and organized

Define roles and responsibilities of the new head coaches and team directors

Define roles and responsibilities to help avoid confusion about who will be in charge for various tasks at the team level. With a clear leader, teams are able to make decisions quickly and communicate effectively. You may have already established these roles on the team before it expanded, but you will need additional support as the teams grow. Teams will need to constantly recruit and develop new coaches and volunteers.

Questions for head coaches, team directors, and team leadership

- What will the new head coaches be responsible for planning and organizing? Will there be shared responsibilities?
- How will the new team directors work together to ensure that team management runs smoothly? Will you establish a team leadership committee or board of directors? Will teams be operating under one umbrella? Does that umbrella have its own identity?

Identify other roles

Will the new team be able to share any roles with the original team or will they need to identify all new coach/volunteer roles? Most of the time the new teams can share some roles and responsibilities while they are figuring out how they will work together.

There are other responsibilities beyond the head coach and team director that may need a defined role on your team. These roles can be very team-dependent, but if you find yourself spending a lot of time on any of the following tasks, you should define the role and find someone else to manage it.

- Apparel/team swag/merch manager
- Food coordinator (for event weekends and end-of-season banquet, etc.)
- Treasurer or finance point-person
- Team-level GRiT coordinator
- Team-level adventure coordinator

- Team-level Teen Trail Corps coordinator
- Camping coordinator for event weekends
- Website & tech support
- Equipment manager
- Volunteer coordinator
- Social media and photographer

→ CLICK TO VIEW NICA'S FULL SAMPLE VOLUNTEER ROLES & RESPONSIBILITIES

Understand how to mentor new leaders within your team

Identify potential leaders early

If you are a part of a growing composite team, know in the back of your head that you will need to expand at some point. You should be looking for potential leaders and great head coaches constantly. Get to know your coaches, observe the way they work with athletes and other coaches, and give coaches that show leadership qualities the opportunity to develop. If you have coaches on your team that really believe in the mission, vision, and core values of NICA they can develop into a great head coach. Bringing those people into team leadership helps build strong programs and allows them to expand to meet the needs of more kids and more communities.

Create a clearly-defined vision for the team

Start with a clearly defined vision of your team. Root that vision in the mission of NICA. If you have a clearly defined vision, making tough decisions is easier because you can look at every decision through your vision. People will bring you lots of ideas as a head coach, some of them will be good ideas but they won't be the right idea for your team – and that's okay. If you have a clear vision, you can say "no" and have a clear reason why you said "no."



Coach meetings

Annual early season coaches meetings help communicate your team vision, your coach philosophy, the needs of the team, and the expectations for coaches on the team. Setting clear roles and expectations early in every season helps you develop new leaders. Use coach meetings to hear from your coaches and let them be a part of the planning process. This will help empower them and it will help you understand who wants to step up. If you know you will need to expand in the near future, let your coaches know. This will help everyone start to prepare for the expansion. This can also be a great time to directly ask potential new head coaches to step up and spend a season working with you before they will need to take over their own team.

Coach practice

Holding a preseason coaches-only practice allows you to practice setting up drills, games, and short courses at your venue. It also provides an opportunity to observe your coaches and identify your leaders. Ask returning coaches to step up and lead different stations for your new coaches. The returning coaches gain experience leading while in a low-stress environment.

Delegate responsibilities to fellow coaches

It will be important for you to delegate responsibilities to other coaches and volunteers. One head coach cannot be everything on a growing team. If you clearly lay out the roles and responsibilities that you need filled and directly ask a couple of qualified candidates you will get the best results. You might get a response from an email or message, but more often than not, you will not hear from anyone. This can be frustrating for head coaches because they feel like they asked for help and no one stepped up. The direct ask, with the option to say 'no', will let the person know you believe in them and that you think they have the skills to do the job well.

It can also be difficult for head coaches to let go of some of their responsibilities. If you are a head coach the best way to keep coaching fun and develop new coaches is to delegate some of your tasks and responsibilities. It can feel daunting to teach someone how you do something, so head coaches can get stuck and never delegate. This hurts the head coaches and hurts the team. Remember the goal is for the team to live and grow beyond one individual coach. Bring coaches in, teach them how to do the jobs you need done, and allow them to do the job. This will be especially important for teams that need to expand, split practice venues, and develop in new communities.

It is a sign of success and growth if the head coach needs to ask for help. Understanding when to ask for support is a sign of strength.

CASE STUDY

Prepare your team community for expansion

When the leadership of the Madison Westside Composite team proposed the idea of splitting the teams there was a lot of anxiety from the coaches and parents on the teams that would be starting new teams. The coaches didn't think they were ready to lead. They really like being a part of the team, they like coaching athletes at practices and races, and they loved showing up to practice and knowing exactly what to do because the head coach created the plans. They were nervous to take on that new responsibility. They didn't know if it would be fun any more if they were in charge.

The new head coaches were not thrown into the deep end. They were mentored, they were supported, and they were given time to learn. They also had all of the resources and experience of NICA coaches from across the country to rely on.

The new head coaches worked as a group and created amazing teams that supported the growth of mountain biking in their communities. They mentored new coaches and made sure that their teams continued to grow after their time with the team was over. Growth and succession planning are one of the head coaches main jobs. Make sure your team can reach as many kids in your community as possible and make sure it lasts beyond you.

→ CLICK TO VIEW NICA'S SUCCESSION PLANNING GUIDE



Prepare for a composite team expansion

Outline the timeline for the change

Give you and your team a year to prepare for the change. You can start by getting people excited about the expansion and helping all of the athletes, families, and coaches understand why you will be expanding and the benefits of expanding. Also begin to mentor new leaders into their future roles.

Create names for the new teams

Your new team names should clearly state the **school** or **region** that they will represent. This is so important to help avoid confusion for existing athletes and prospective athletes in the future. It also helps you market your team to new athletes and families. New families should be able to read the name of your team and understand if it is the team they should join based on where they live. You can also ask your league director to announce the new team on league social media and list the new team on the league website.

Examples of composite team original names and expansion names

- Madison Westside Composite (original)
 - Madison West High School
 - Madison Memorial High School
 - Verona Area High School
 - Madison Westside Composite

The teams have names that clearly define where they are located; this helps everyone.

Create logos for the new team(s)

Creating a new identity for teams is important. If your team is associated with a school, simply use the school logo and colors – no need to make things more complicated (or confusing for athletes and parents) with random colors, logos, or a separate identity. Athletes will feel a sense of pride being associated with their school.

You can maintain a connection with your original team or "umbrella" organization in creative ways. Consider a unified practice jersey, or adding a small logo to your new jersey to show the affiliation.

At right: more teams means more opportunities for kids to participate in NICA events! Photo by Adam Haynes, Idaho Interscholastic Cycling League





Communicate composite team expansion effectively

Describe composite team expansion purpose

Define what it means to expand

Again, splitting a growing team is a good thing! Splitting (or expanding) means that you've created something so amazing that it needs to grow. Help families, athletes, and coaches see this as a measure of their success.

Define different ways to "expand"

Focus on the new opportunities that will be created from team expansion when talking to athletes, families, and fellow coaches about why you are expanding:

- We are expanding into two teams next year to support the growth of our school based team while continuing to provide a program for athletes that don't have a school based team yet.
- We are expanding into multiple teams next season but will continue to share resources, practice locations and we will have adjacent pit zone areas at races.

Change can be scary. Clear and concise communication will be important. Continue to talk about the positive reasons you decided to expand your current team throughout the season leading up to the expansion.

CASE STUDY

Working toward school-based recognition

The Verona Area Schools athletes had been a part of the Westside Composite since the second year of the team. There were a handful of attempts to get the athletes and the team officially recognized by the school in the early years. Coaches reached out to the athletic director and the administration. One coach was neighbors with the head principal. The team thought it would be "easy" to get the team recognized.

It was not.

After a few years of rejection, the decision was made to create a Verona Area Schools team in Pit Zone and to order jerseys that mirror the colors and design of the official high school colors and designs. The design was different enough from the official school that it would not ruffle feathers with administration.

The team grew.

Within a year of being called the Verona Area Schools team with jerseys that resemble the community they served, the school administration granted official club status and started to award club varsity letters to athletes. The team was nervous about splitting from the composite, but once it did the school administration was able to see how many athletes were positively impacted by "their" team. The school and the community were able to take pride in what athletes from their community were doing.

When you communicate to members of your team community, focus on how splitting the team creates **opportunities for growth and community pride** in the team.

Communicate the inevitability of composite team expansion to all new and current families

If you know that your team will need to expand in the future, be upfront with athletes and families when you are recruiting and when they register. If the plan is to expand within a year or two, let families know at season information meetings and in your team communication. This allows families to be a part of the growth of the new team rather than feeling like something is being "taken away" from them.



Communicate to all team stakeholders about the importance of composite team expansion

Let your partners know about the expansion and the goals of the expansion. Partners will be excited that you can support more athletes, families, and communities but they will also want to be kept in the loop.

Outline the timeline of the expansion

Give yourself at least one season to prepare for a team expansion. You can make the change in a shorter period if there is a desire, but it is nice to let athletes, families, and coaches get used to the idea of team expansion and to intentionally plan for success.

Outline the logistics of how new teams will operate after the split

Describe how resources will be shared and what new resources will need to be purchased

Many team assets can be shared between teams that practice at the same venues and plan to have adjacent pit zones at races. A team trailer is a big-ticket item that can easily be shared between teams as they grow. Team tools, bike storage racks, repair stands, and tables can also be shared easily at events.

Some materials will need to be purchased or donated over the first couple of seasons, such as a new tent and flags that represent new team identities. Additional coaching materials such as cones, rubber chickens, balls, etc will be needed for each team if they will practice at different times and different venues. New jerseys and team apparel will need to be designed and ordered as well. The new team will need to establish its own brand and jerseys and apparel will help build team pride. To keep costs down for families, you can work with your league director to allow a grace period for requiring new jerseys for existing team members.

CASE STUDY

Using jersey design to create identity AND unity

Separate jerseys for racing doesn't mean that teams cannot keep some shared identity. The teams that split out of the Madison Westside Composite all have their own team jerseys but they all share a common "practice" jersey as well. The "practice" jersey changes every year and is included in the registration fee for all athletes. Having the practice jersey helps all of the teams still feel connected and a part of something larger than their parts. It also allows the teams to get creative with design every year for the "practice" jersey while keeping the race kits consistent and recognizable.

Describe how coaches will be managed

Coach management and distribution will depend on how the new teams will interact at practice. If the new teams continue to practice at the same venues on the same days, coaches from all teams can work with athletes from all teams. Make sure that coaches have emergency contact information for all of the athletes they will be working with at practice.

If teams will be practicing at different venues, or on different days of the week, the coaches should practice with their team. This will need to be done intentionally to make sure that coach-to-athlete ratios of 2:8 or 1:6 can be maintained on trail rides.



CASE STUDY

Early-season skills practice & coach development

One way that the Madison Westside teams helped inspire growth was to hold early season skills/games practices away from trails at parks that were easy for families to travel to. The goal was to make it really easy for new athletes to try out mountain biking and to get them hooked on the team before asking them to travel a little further for trail riding. Practicing in city parks also helped promote the team because community members could see the teams practicing and wanted to know more! It was a great recruitment tool.

The goal was simple but the logistics needed some planning. The head coach needed to make sure that each team had qualified coaches to run skills stations. The team also focused on coach development and helped a lot of coaches level up by working with the league to schedule OTB 101 clinics and first aid clinics in our area. It worked! Many coaches leveled up and started to feel really confident leading skills instruction and games.

Once the teams started riding predominantly trails, instead of open field skills and games, the teams could combine for trail rides. Because so many coaches had leveled up, the teams could create a lot of different ride groups that met the goals and needs of the athletes.

Describe how finances will be split or managed

Team finances can continue to be managed under a shared budget. It can be helpful to establish non-profit status or work with a fiscal sponsor to manage finances of a large team.

All teams will need to create a budget for the operations of their individual teams and a collective budget will need to be created for programmatic costs. Programmatic expenses should be expenses that all teams share. The team budgets should consist of team expenses that vary depending on team size.

It is helpful to have a treasurer for the program as well as a point person for each team.

Keep track of all of your spending and expenses with detailed receipts. Establish a system for reimbursements for spending that is transparent and monitored.

→ CLICK TO VIEW NICA'S TIPS FOR MANAGING TEAM FINANCES

Describe how practice locations and dates will be determined

Create a schedule to share venues between the new teams if needed. Even if the venue has plenty of space to accommodate the teams, it will be important to have a clear schedule as the teams grow. The teams will need to communicate in the off season to make sure they aren't planning to use the same venue on the same days if the teams are too large. Communicate early and often to make sure everyone is on the same page.



CASE STUDY

Managing growth at practice venues

As the Madison Westside teams grew it became difficult to practice at the same venues on the same days. The teams made a decision in the off season to split practice on different days of the week. The largest team, Madison West, practiced on Tuesday and Thursday. The remaining teams, Madison Memorial, Verona and Westside Composite, practiced on Mondays and Wednesdays.

This didn't need to happen the first couple years of the split, but it became necessary once the teams grew above 120+ athletes. The teams practice venues are pretty small (only about 4 miles of stacked loops) and there was no way to spread out as a team and avoid upsetting the rest of the local MTB community.

Splitting practice days was another hurdle for the teams but it helped them grow and gave them the opportunity to reach more kids.

Outline how teams will continue to communicate

Regular communication between team leaders will make sure that everyone feels informed and will avoid confusion and conflicts. As long as the teams continue to share resources, coaches, or venues you will need to communicate regularly to avoid miscommunication, assumptions, and conflict.

Questions to consider

- Will you all share a website?
- Will you all share team communication apps?
- How will you make sure to update team leaders about any last minute changes?

Teams can have one website that helps new families understand where to find their team. Teams can share a team communication app, such as TeamSnap, to keep communication organized and clear. Many team communication apps have plans that can accommodate multiple teams in one organization. This allows team leaders to have access to all teams while still allowing teams to communicate effectively to just their coaches, athletes, and families.

It is important to create communication templates to ensure that all teams are receiving similar information clearly and concisely. Communication breakdowns are one of the biggest pitfalls of team expansion. Monitor for miscommunication and correct course when necessary.

At right: effective communication within your new team structure will make all the difference with managing your teams, especially for logistically-intensive event weekends! Photo by Aaron Puttcamp, Pennsylvania Interscholastic Cycling League





CASE STUDY

Team website & communications

As the Madison Westside teams grew they continued to share a website. The main page of the website directed families and athletes to the team in their community. The teams started using a team communication app to organize individual team communications as they grew. The addition of the communications app was really helpful for leadership, coaches, and families. It was not perfect but once everyone learned how to use the app and what types of communication to expect, communication management became much easier.

The teams could share one paid account for the app and still create individual communication channels for each individual team plus an umbrella channel.

You will need to be explicit about how you are going to communicate with athletes and families as you grow. There are many ways to communicate with each other, as a team you need to stick to one or two methods!

A great example is to send a weekly email with all of the important information for the week, upcoming events, and action items. Then use the team communication app for last minute reminders, updates, attendance or practice cancellations. Stick to these methods and help families understand what to expect.

Revel in the success!

Expanding a composite team into multiple teams becomes necessary when the current team becomes too large for effective recruitment or requires athletes to travel extensively for practices. Aligning with NICA's vision of inclusive cycling programs for all youth, the aim is to ensure accessibility and enable successful recruitment.

The goal is to get more kids on bikes, not just the kids who already ride!

CASE STUDY

Finding success in a team split

The four teams had a combined roster of 230 plus athletes in their most recent season. This is 3.8% of the available high school student population of these three high schools. If the teams would not have expanded in their early years, there is a strong likelihood that the Verona and Madison Memorial teams would not have grown at the rate they have. They would not have developed strong team leadership and head coaches because they could have relied on the existing head coach and team director. The teams would not have been able to serve the population of kids in the community that needed a NICA team.

The best way to get more kids on bikes is to make it easy for new kids to find mountain biking. By splitting the Madison Westside Composite team up, kids, families and communities found the transformative power of mountain biking.

The goal is to get more kids on bikes, not just the kids that already ride bikes!



Team Expansion Checklist

A quick guide for planning your own team expansion/split

Does your composite team need to expand? Check if any of the following are true: School-based enrollment is growing steadily Some of our athletes have to travel long distances to practice (more than average for our region) Team management is becoming difficult/arduous due to team size Registration is capped due to lack of resources, but there is still interest in the team If you checked any of the boxes above, it's time to think about expanding (splitting) your teams! Use the checklist below as your team's guide to creating an expanded team that gets more kids on bikes in your region!			
Define a vision Define a vision for your new team(s), centering on team values and philosophy Create target outcomes for your expansion Determine what type of teams will be created Build trust and cohesion with the new teams	Create systems and structures Define the roles and responsibilities of head coach and team director Identify standard operating procedures for your team		
Prepare the split/expansion Outline the timeline for the change Create names for the new teams Create logos for the new team(s)	Mentor new leaders within your teams Determine how to develop coaches within your team Elevate new coaches into leadership roles Create opportunities for coaches to lead and give them space to learn Establish a timeline for mentorship and independence		
Communicate team expansion Describe composite team expansion purpose Communicate to all constituents the importance of composite team splits Outline the logistics and timeline of the split	Outline new team operations Determine how team resources will be shared Determine how coaches will be managed Determine how finances will be split or managed Determine practice locations/dates for each team Outline how teams will continue to communicate		

