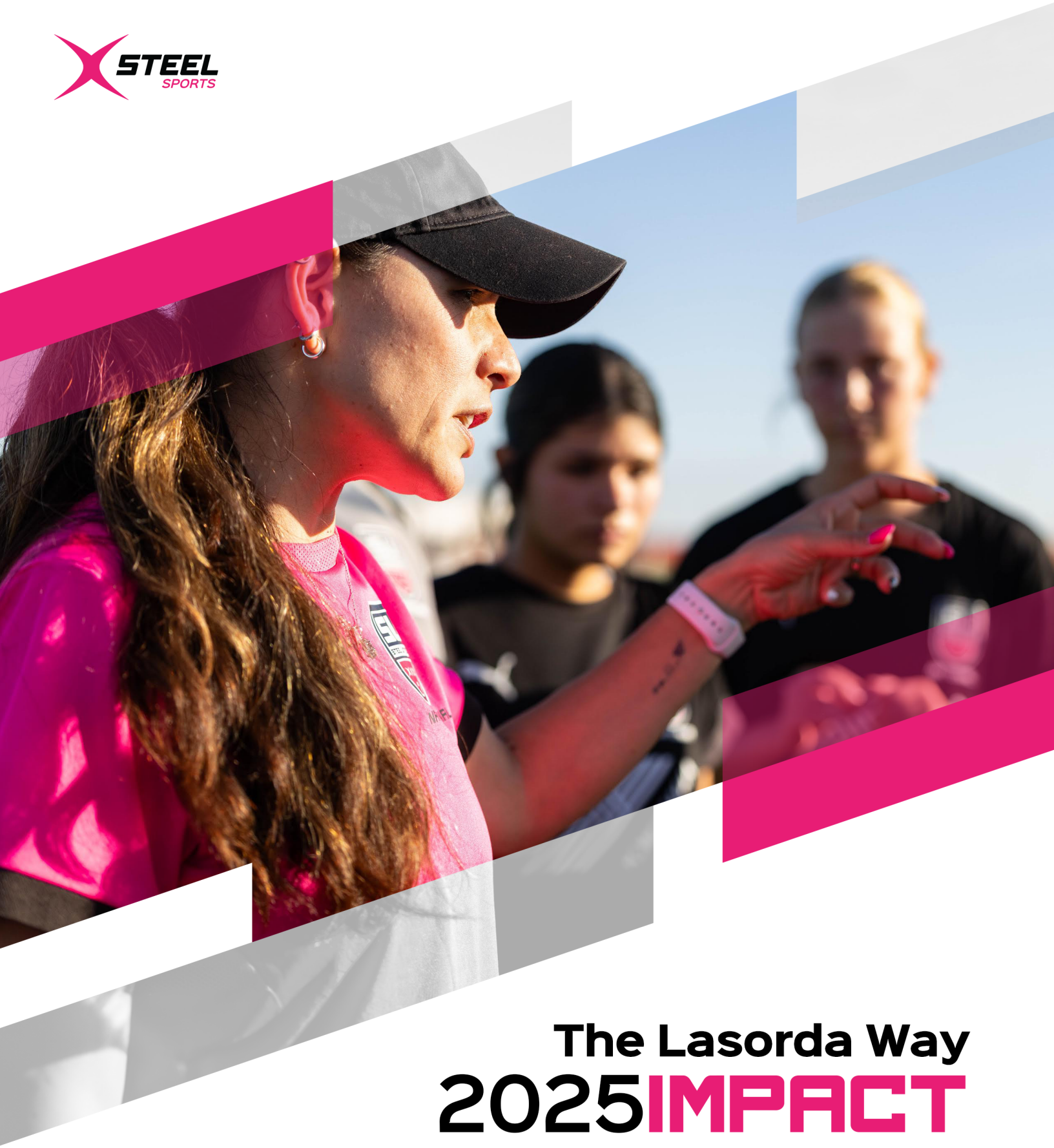
STEEL SPORTS



The Lasorda Way 2025 IMPACT REPORT

In January 2026, Dr. Walker and Shahaf Bareni collaborated with staff from Steel Sports and investigated the reliability and validity of their youth sport Team Survey and the Player Survey as part of an applied student investigation project. Steel Sports completes multiple surveys each year to track the performance of their youth-centered development approach and use the findings to guide new training to improve current delivery or recognize the need to expand or enhance positive youth development. This independent review examined the Steel Sports survey's question reliability and validity to ensure that the survey instrument works as it was designed and that the information it captures is accurate and correct.

The raw data from consecutive years was examined and removal of common on-line data collection limitations (missed questions, incomplete surveys) was completed along with examination of outliers and skewness. The final cleaned data sets were analyzed and that investigation determined the core questions demonstrated internal consistency, test-retest consistency, and split data comparative consistency along with parallel consistency.

Additional data analytics examined inter-item correlation and individual item regression to confirm question validity and direct relationships between the quality of the Steel Sports Coach and Parent communication strategies and program success. Furthermore, parents' response patterns demonstrate that the parents recognize the importance of the specific unique efforts the coaches provide that impact the character development of their children reinforcing that Steel Sports is delivering the "Lasorda Way" of positive youth development through sport participation that correlates with the organizations coach training and coach-to-athlete delivery system.

Dr. Joseph Walker
Faculty, Kinesiology Health Promotion and Recreation
University of North Texas

Impact Report Contents

Foreword by Dr. Joseph Walker	**2**
Introduction by Martin Brown	**3**
Summary	**4**
Overview / Methodology	**6**
A Look at Steel Athletes	**7**
The Lasorda Way & Core Values	**8-9**
Core Competencies	**10-12**
Trust in Coaches	**13**
Core Competencies & Positive Mental Health	**14-16**
Growth Mindset, Grit & Free Play	**17-20**
Conclusion	**21**
Survey Quotes	**22**

At Steel Sports, our mission has never wavered: put Kids First, always, and inspire every young person to reach their full potential—on the field, in the classroom, and in life. The 2025 Impact Report reflects a year where that mission wasn't just lived... it was elevated.

After five years of surveying parents, coaches, and athletes, we are proud to share that our data has been independently verified and validated by Dr. Joseph Walker of the Kinesiology, Health Promotion, and Recreation Department at the University of North Texas—reinforcing the integrity, consistency, and credibility of what we measure and why it matters.

What continues to make me proudest is not a single program, initiative, or statistic—though the numbers this year are extraordinary. It's the environment our coaches and staff create every day. An environment where 89% of our athletes report strong characteristics of positive mental health, where 95% consistently demonstrate the Core Values that define us—Teamwork, Respect, Integrity, and Commitment—and where an incredible 93% say Free Play is one of the most meaningful parts of their experience, up again this year.

Those numbers matter because of what they represent:
Young people who feel supported.
Young people who feel confident.
Young people who feel they belong.

They represent coaches who see potential in every child. Families who trust us. Communities that rally around our mission. And an organization that refuses to compromise on what youth sports should be about—character, joy, growth, and opportunity.

This year reaffirmed something fundamental about Steel Sports: when we bring The Lasorda Way to life with intention and consistency, kids don't just improve—they thrive. They take pride in who they are becoming. They embrace challenge. They develop resilience and leadership that will carry far beyond the game.

As you read this report, you'll see the impact of a system built with purpose and strengthened by people who care deeply about the longterm development of young athletes. You'll see proof that our approach is working—and that our athletes are better for it.

Thank you to our coaches, our families, our partners, and the entire Steel Nation. Your belief in this mission fuels everything we do. And as proud as I am of the year behind us, I'm even more excited about the futures we are helping to build.
—and together, we're just getting started.



Martin Brown
Steel Sports President & CEO

THE LASORDA WAY
2025 IMPACT REPORT

The Steel Sports Mission — *To inspire youth to reach their potential on and off the field, by developing them as athletes and people through the Steel Sports Coaching System* — is showing measurable results year over year and translating to real-world impact. Following over five years of measurement and analysis, 2025 results once again show that The Steel Sports Coaching System: *The Lasorda Way* is positively impacting kids' lives in ways that build up their leadership skills, elevate their sports experience, and foster growth in Core Values, Core Competencies, Grit and Growth Mindset leading to increased characteristics of positive mental health. Athlete and parent data show that Steel kids are thriving and coaches are central to their athletic and character development. Steel kids are consistently reporting skills and strengths above their peers and national averages as they matriculate into college and careers with unique and substantial skills to lead and succeed.

"When we talk about impact, we're talking about life outcomes. Steel athletes are gaining the skills, resilience, and confidence to lead in school, careers, and their communities — and that's the ultimate measure of success."

— Steve Jones, Senior VP, The Lasorda Way

Executive Summary

Purpose: To measure Steel athletes' development and growth in comparison to prior years and to national averages.

Mission: To inspire youth to reach their potential on and off the field, by developing them as athletes and people through the Steel Sports Coaching System.

TOP HIGHLIGHTS

Steel kids are growing as athletes, leaders, and citizens.

Kids Development, **Competition**, and **Having Fun** rank as the three highest "reasons Steel kids play." Athletes frequently mention "having fun" as a motivator, viewing fun as a crucial aspect of both practice and game settings.

93%
97% of Steel athletes reported their high level of commitment to practice attendance while report excellent game attendance – Steel kids are **invested** in their sport.

95% of Steel athletes reported "good" or "excellent" understanding and utilization of the Core Values.

89% of Steel athletes reported "good" or "excellent" scores related to Grit and Growth Mindset.

81% of Steel athletes reported "good" or "excellent" scores related to positive mental health.

94% of **Steel parents** believe sports will help their child achieve their academic goals.

72% of **Steel parents** believe that Steel specifically will help their athlete prepare for their careers.

100% of **Steel parents** say their athletes are implementing our Core Values off the field.

Notable 5-Year Trends

Five years of measurement and analysis offer solid data and shining examples of kids growing life skills through sports.

Consistency is a defining strength. Athlete-reported outcomes such as Core Values implementation, Core Competency development, and Grit & Growth Mindset have remained high year over year.

Indicators of **Positive Mental Health**, particularly self-control, positivity, and concentration continue to suggest the strong development of protective skills for kids which support and build resilience during adversity.

Grit & Growth Mindset stand out year over year, and Steel athletes emphasize enjoying challenges and taking pride in completing difficult tasks.

Overview

- **Background:** Six+ years surveying and analyzing data from kids, caregivers, and coaches to measure our impact. 2024 marked our most thorough review yet, and in 2025 we were able to replicate our research and analysis in the most consistent way yet. Our results highlight both the consistency and depth of the positive impact our coaches and Steel Sports Coaching System: The Lasorda Way make on kids.
- **What impact are we making?** The Steel Sports Coaching System: The Lasorda Way is consistently supporting character development in Steel athletes in the form of Core Competencies. It is effectively instilling the Core Values: Teamwork, Respect, Integrity, and Commitment, and cultivating characteristics of positive mental health. *The Lasorda Way* is a system dedicated to putting Kids First and the results show empowerment in every measurable aspect.
- **Objectives:**
  - To measure the impact Steel coaches and The Lasorda Way are making on kids
  - To demonstrate the growth and character development Steel Kids are experiencing
  - To empower kids to grow beyond the game

Methodology

We compared Steel athletes with national averages in areas such as high school graduation, college matriculation, and positive mental health. Using our *Core Competency* data, we compared our athletes' *Growth Mindset*, Grit, and proven learning outcomes from *Free Play*. We compared year-over-year areas of emphasis such as our *Core Values*: Teamwork, Respect, Integrity, and Commitment.

Data Collected:

- Athlete Self Evaluation
- Coach Feedback
- Team Survey (Athletes/parents)
- Facilities & Events Survey (All attendees at events such as tournaments)
- Kids First Camp Survey
- Feedback Forums (Online parent focus groups)

1. **1,300 athletes via player self-evaluations**
   (Steel Teams)
   Athletes self-evaluated using five-point Likert scale and provided comments related to prompts (Free Play, Response to Failure, Personal Growth, Trusted Adult Messages, Strengths/Areas to Improve, and Super Power).

2. **2,300 coaches in response to player self-evaluations**
   (Steel Teams)
   Coaches evaluate and respond to player evaluations. This is a valuable look at two distinct perspectives and how they match or do not match. National Team players received multiple evaluations.

3. **1,300 parents/adult caregivers via team surveys**
   (Steel Teams)
   Participants (typically adult caregivers although it can be athletes themselves) are asked to complete a survey on their experience playing for Steel teams. Team surveys include feedback primarily from Steel United and Team Steel and include National Program team feedback representing about 250 results.

4. **1,000 Facilities & Events Surveys**
   (adult caregivers, players, coaches, officials)
   Customers from tournaments and overnight camps, typically adult caregivers, are asked to complete a survey after each event. The survey covers areas related to the event and includes Core Values and NPS.

5. **300 Kids First Camp Surveys**
   (adult caregivers)
   Kids First Camps included families and community members typically adult caregivers, are asked to complete a survey after each event. The survey covers areas related to the program and includes Core Values, Steel Sports Coaches, and NPS.

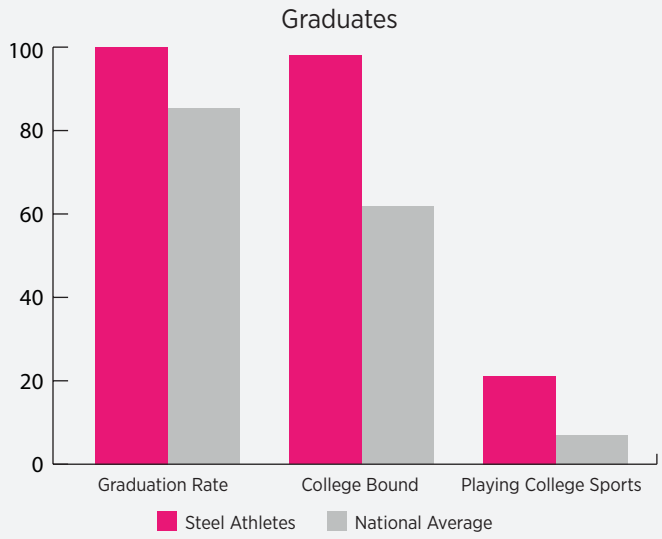
6. **Feedback Forums**
   (all regions)
   All parents were invited to an anonymous webinar-style polling event during which they were surveyed and had an open forum to give feedback.

“When athletes are supported, challenged, and understood as individuals, the results extend far beyond the field: higher graduation rates, greater access to opportunity, continued athletic participation, and a deep commitment to service. Steel coaches create environments where young people don’t just perform, they thrive academically, athletically, and as contributing members of their communities.”

— Ian Hughes, Senior VP, Staff & Player Development

Steel Athletes

Steel athletes continue to achieve academic success beyond the national average.



- **100% high school grad rate (National avg. 87%)**
- **97% high school grads to college (National avg 61%)**
- **22% Steel athletes playing sports in college (National Avg. 7% play a varsity sport and less than 2% play a DI sport) **Compiled from NCAA and NFHS statistics***

Access:

- $110,000 of financial aid distributed
- 123 athletes receive assistance
- $910 Average per athlete
- $25,000 from the Steel Sports Foundation

Athletes in Service:

10,000
hours spent serving local communities - coaches and athletes

4,000
items donated

$35,000
raised for charity

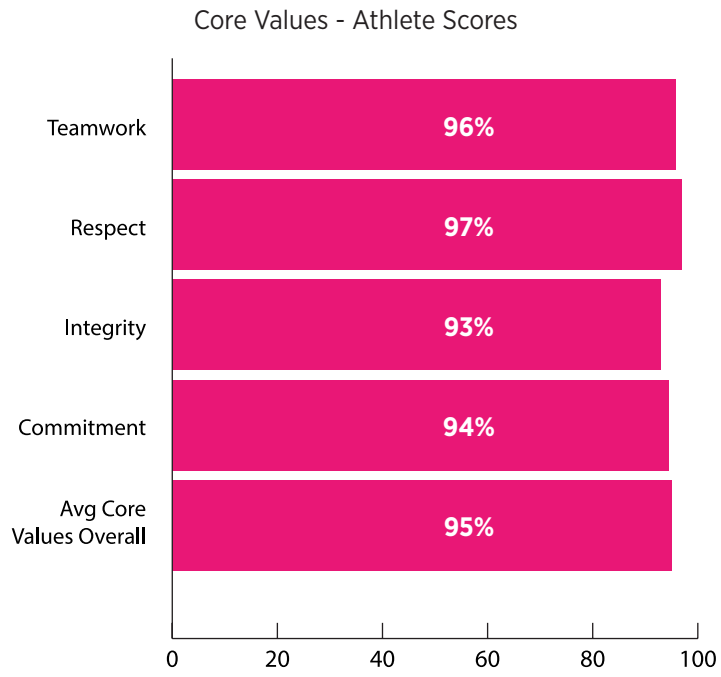
The Lasorda Way

Regular training teaches coaches to deliberately concentrate on demonstrating and instructing core values in every facet of their coaching and interactions with athletes, parents, officials, and opponents. Coaches help their athletes reach the stage of transformational behavior by guiding them through the three stages of awareness, engagement, and reflection. This means that our athletes can use these core values not only on the field but also at home, school, and in their community. Additionally, athletes are given access to online modules that offer core values examples and emphasize the value of them while allowing them to define them in a way that is true to themselves. Parents also finish a Positive Sports Parenting Module that explains our core values, how to teach their children about them, and how parents should embrace and model them for their children.

"Core values don't become real until they're practiced every day."

— Ian Hughes, Senior VP, Staff & Player Development

UNDERSTANDING AND EMBODIMENT OF CORE VALUES: PLAYER EVALUATIONS



Core Values scores remain a cornerstone of the Steel experience. 2025 scores are consistently high for the fourth year in a row. 95% indicated "satisfactory" or higher for their understanding and implementation of the Core Values. Parents, athletes and coaches alike score remarkably high and credit both athletes and staff for maintaining high levels of visible Core Value behaviors.

CORE VALUES

Teamwork: Athletes describe teamwork as a shared responsibility that uplifts the group. They describe collective accountability and support for one another. "We win as a team." They describe each player as having a unique role that strengthens the whole, and they go beyond physical teamwork to emphasize the emotional support from teamwork. Communication is an integral aspect that supports physical performance, trust, leadership, and a sense of belonging. "It feels like a family."

Respect: Athletes relate respect to their coach/player relationships—listening and accepting feedback. They value sportsmanship and express this consistently as it relates to teammates, opponents, and officials. In the team setting "Encouraging instead of criticizing" is an important element.

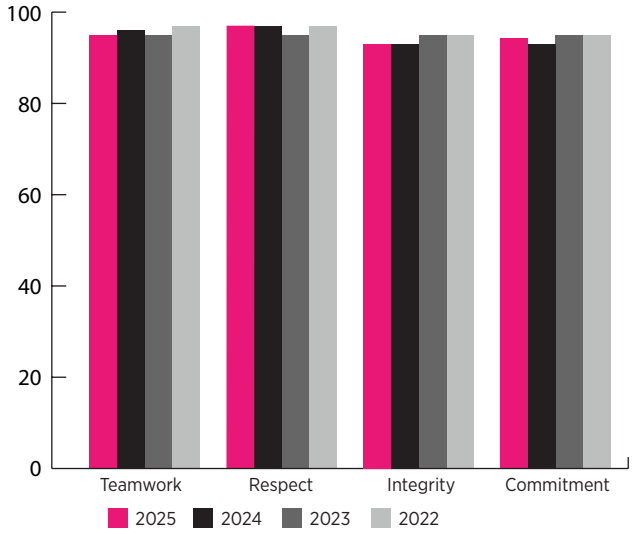
Integrity: Athletes note integrity as aligning actions with values and doing the right thing consistently. They specify "honest play" and "owning mistakes" as key elements of integrity, especially "Playing fair even if we might lose." Player comments also illustrate that integrity is being reinforced through positive mistake culture and debriefs.

Commitment: Athletes describe commitment related to attendance with an emphasis on best effort. They frequently describe a desire to improve and "Practicing even when it's hard." Comments often center on Growth Mindset and Grit — athletes connect their commitment to personal development. As much, or more than physical presence, athletes describe emotional perseverance related to their commitment.

Athletes comment that the Core Values guide their behavior and expectations. Athletes believe Core Values are central to their learning, development, and performance.

CORE VALUES: SCORES FROM TEAMS SURVEYS

Parent Perspectives: Core Values 2022-2025



Core Values scores from parents continue to be high (well above 4 on a Likert scale), and range between 93%-98% positive scores over the past four years. The data show a strong correlation between parents' evaluations of the Core Values and their decision to allow their child to play again.

Parents highlight the value in coaches developing the whole child—treating the athlete as a unique and valued person while mentoring them beyond the field. The most striking theme from parent comments focuses on the supportive holistic approach coaches provide.

Coach vs. Player: Core Values



While athlete Core Values scores are very high, it is important to note that coaches' scores are consistently higher (this is true of all coach scores). Coaches tend to see potential and positive aspects in athletes. They are pushing them to improve and elevating expectations.

"Steel Sports coaches are trained to recognize genuine, authentic teachable moments when our Core Values — Teamwork, Respect, Integrity, and Commitment — show up in real time. In those moments, coaches intentionally elevate player awareness by naming the value being demonstrated, engaging athletes in brief conversations about what they saw, and guiding reflection on how the same value can be applied beyond sport. This deliberate approach helps athletes internalize values-based habits, supporting behavior change that carries into everyday life, not only on the field of play."

— Steve Jones, Senior VP, The Lasorda Way

Core Competencies: Confidence, Self-Control, Positivity, Leadership, Humility, Concentration, Openness to Constructive Criticism

U.S. Parent Perspectives & Steel Athlete Core Competencies

- 80% of parents believe that sports help their child learn about discipline and dedication, as well as how to get along with others. In comparison, we correlate discipline with self-control, which 85% of **Steel athletes** score "good" or "excellent". We connect dedication with commitment which 94% of **Steel athletes** score "good" or "excellent". (PCSFN Science Board, 2020)

The Steel Sports Coaching System: The Lasorda Way, supports athletic and character development in ways that shape athlete work ethic as well as resilience and leadership. Where self-control and commitment scores are high, so too are athlete perspectives related to Grit & Growth Mindset. When asked about their "super powers" (unique skills) as an athlete, players with the highest scores describe their Grit and Growth Mindset:

"My power is my desire to be the best I can on and off the field and the ability to work hard and to be consistent."

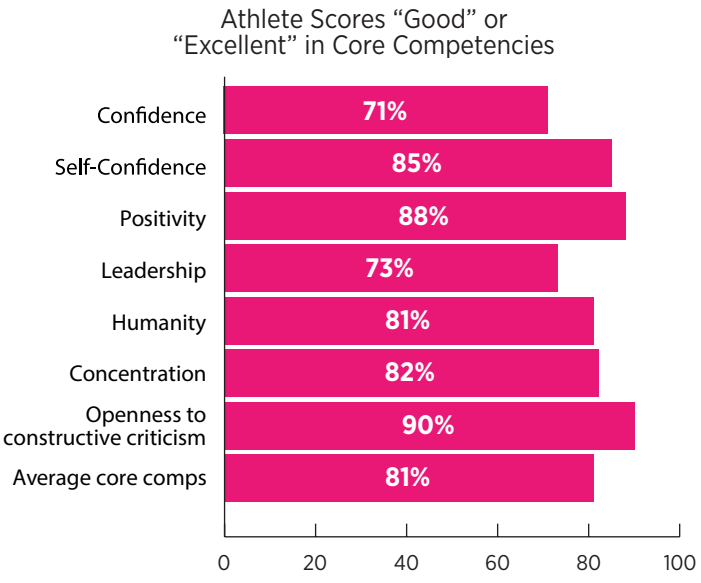
"I will never overreact at anything no matter the situation. I will always keep a cool head."

"My super power as an athlete is my ability to accept feedback and immediately apply it to my play."

"Leadership and ability to take criticism and make myself better from that."

Players with the highest Self-Control and Commitment scores (average of 5 out of 5 across four metrics—Self-Control and Core Values commitment, Practice Commitment, and Game Commitment scores) highlighted their leadership and character development. Their comments represent how they identify as leaders, teammates, and competitors. In comparison, Steel athletes with the lowest average scores (3.5—3.0) distinctly described their skills in more athletic terms such as their speed or defensive skills. Building athlete proficiency in Self-Control and Commitment appears to deepen athlete understanding of their roles as leaders while also reinforcing that identity is far more complex and valuable than simply athletic skill. This is an area we will continue to track and support through The Lasorda Way.

- 73% of parents believe that sports benefit their child's mental health and 88% believe sports benefit their child's physical health. In the Core Competencies Chart below we illustrate how athletes assess their proficiency in 7 areas which our Lasorda Way curriculum prioritizes, and which are associated with characteristics of positive mental health: (PCSFN Science Board, 2020)



Steel kids express high scores (over 80) in 5 of 7 Core Competencies, and solid scores (over 70) in all 7 of the Core Competencies: Confidence, Self Control, Positivity, Leadership, Humility, Concentration, and Openness to Constructive Criticism. Cultivating Core Competencies occurs through the strategies engrained in The Lasorda Way curriculum and are intentionally cultivated by Steel Coaches.

Why are the Core Competencies so important?

They are skills that can be improved through coaching, and Core Competencies lead to higher scores in Grit and Growth Mindset as well as Positive Mental Health. The higher the Core Competency scores, the higher levels of Grit & Growth Mindset. Steel coaches foster an environment in which Core Competencies are learned and developed while simultaneously building athletes' Grit and Growth Mindset.

71% **Confidence:** Confidence is a skill that can be developed, it is not innate. While confidence remains the most challenging of the Core Competencies to grow, Steel coaches have a profound impact on children's confidence by providing positive reinforcement, offering constructive feedback, modeling resilience, fostering teamwork, and setting realistic goals. Confidence can be built through positive coaching behaviors, autonomy-supportive environments, and constructive feedback. Autonomy-supportive coaching has been shown to increase resilience and optimism among youth athletes, contributing to overall athlete development (Zhang, Du, & Tao, 2025). Steel coaches provide frequent opportunities for autonomy through Free Play and constructive feedback during the postgame debriefs. Through coach guidance, athletes learn how to navigate challenges, improve their skills, and, most importantly, believe in themselves.

Athletes describe moving from anxious to self-assured. As they progress through the Lasorda Way they express feeling empowered instead of frustrated and a growing willingness to try new skills: taking shots, speaking up, or bouncing back after mistakes. Athletes frequently cite trust in coaches and positive mistake culture as the driving force behind confidence.

85% **Self-Control** is described as emotional regulation after mistakes: staying calm, regaining control, never giving up. They are developing maturity and rely on self-reflection and analysis to grow after a setback.

"Our Core Competencies data highlights athletes' openness to constructive criticism as a meaningful indicator of growth and coachability. We believe this is driven by two connected priorities: (1) teaching athletes a growth mindset so they view feedback as a tool for improvement, and (2) equipping coaches to develop trusted relationships with athletes through consistent mentorship and care. In that environment, constructive feedback is more readily received because athletes understand their coach's intent is supportive, personal, and development-focused — not simply performance-focused."

— Steve Jones, Senior VP, The Lasorda Way

Athlete Feedback on Core Competencies

88% **Positivity:** Steel athletes express encouragement rather than criticism as it pertains to feedback. They describe their ability to stay positive and stay focused during adversity. They value encouragement and are proud to serve their teammates in positive ways. Steel athletes frequently describe their supportive team "vibe" which is peer-driven, not just coach-driven and they balance taking things seriously while remaining positive and optimistic. Steel athletes take ownership of their team culture.

73% **Leadership:** Steel athletes commonly describe leadership as communicating effectively, supporting teammates, demonstrating responsibility and initiative. Because The Lasorda Way encourages authentic leadership all types of leaders are celebrated—from vocal to non-vocal. Steel athletes describe their unique leadership styles and value each one.

81% **Humility:** Steel athletes describe humility as owning their mistakes, being accountable, and accepting feedback with the intent to improve. They consistently describe losses as opportunities to learn and grow while also striving to correct mistakes and face challenges head on. Steel athletes also use self-reflective language and avoid placing blame in their evaluations.

82% **Concentration:** Athletes mention that concentration is a focal point during practice and free play, which they take seriously. Gametime concentration then becomes innate. Mental preparation is crucial and, where it intersects with concentration, players report athletic improvement and growth.

90% **Openness to Criticism:** Hand in hand with humility, Steel players report feedback as helpful and desirable. Ego does not appear to get in the way of their hunger to grow. They report appreciation for honest feedback, authentic reflection, and eagerness to make adjustments. Respect and trust is evident among players and coaches alike.

Athletes say:

"I take time to collect myself after failure, devising a plan. I learned this here."

"It has made me reflect on what went wrong to be able to do better next time."

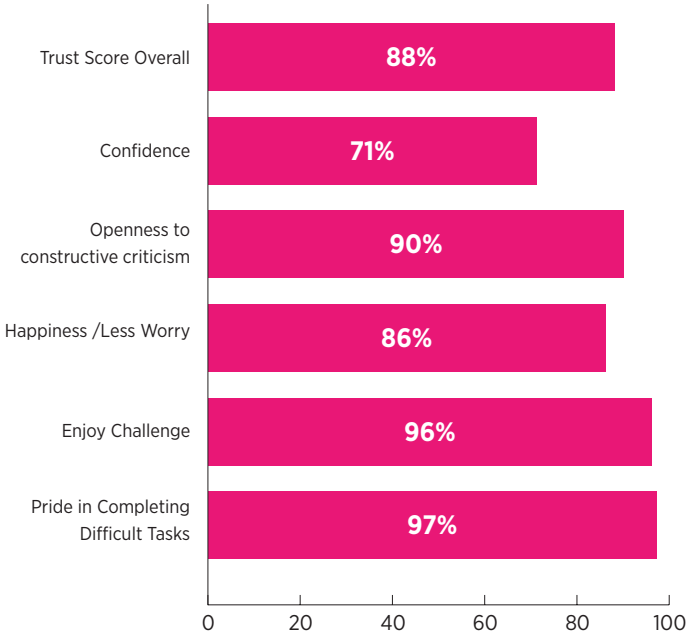
"Being open to change the ways that I do things to help the team."

"My coach gives me confidence to play tougher. I like the most when my coach gives his honest feedback everytime we finished the game. This helps me correct my mistakes and easy to remember while it is fresh from my memory."

Trust in Coaches

In partnership with the Search Institute, Steel Sports incorporates a dedicated module that equips coaches with research-based relationship-building strategies rooted in the Getting Relationships Right framework. Coaches apply five core pillars — Express Care, Challenge Growth, Provide Support, Share Power, and Expand Possibilities — to intentionally strengthen connection, reinforce mutual respect, and build trust within teams and families.

Indicators of Trust from Player to Coach



2025 results again yield a trend related to trust. Steel coaches garner trust reflected frequently in player comments. Feedback is specific and addressed respectfully. Corrections often lead to immediate improvement, and communication feels fair. Athletes frequently describe the balance between coaches challenging them while also supporting them indicating a foundation of trust between the two. The development of trust appears to be a critical element to player development.

Steel athletes describe Steel coaches:

- Feedback is honest and constructive
- Confidence is built, not broken
- Teaching is clear and intentional
- Emotional tone is steady
- Structure is consistent
- Autonomy is allowed

"I love playing and having a coach that is positive and gives me feedback."

"I enjoy that the coaches are very good at teaching us how to be a better soccer player."

"Steel Sports coaches are trained on the importance of building positive developmental relationships with athletes and families, because trust-based relationships are foundational to athlete development and long-term engagement in sport."

— Steve Jones, Senior VP, The Lasorda Way

Parent vs. Player Perspectives on Core Competencies

While Steel Sports does not measure clinical mental health data, we do measure characteristics associated with positive mental health—skills that can build resilience and support well-being over time. We adapt our Core Competency results to create a comparable indicator (not an 'apples-to-apples' comparison). Our data, used comparatively, then provides indicators of Positive Mental Health which we can use to steer our curriculum and shape the overall athlete experience.

U.S. Teens Report

- Recent federal data show that 15–18% of U.S. adolescents (ages 12–17) experienced a major depressive episode between 2023 and 2024. While this reflects a modest decline from pandemic-era peaks, rates remain significantly higher than pre-pandemic levels.
- Approximately 16–20% of U.S. adolescents have a diagnosed anxiety disorder, while over 40% report experiencing symptoms of anxiety, reflecting widespread emotional distress that does not always meet diagnostic thresholds.
- Project Play: State of Play 2024-2025: Findings confirm that youth who report no regular physical activity are two to three times more likely to report frequent feelings of depression or hopelessness compared to peers who are physically active every day, reinforcing physical activity as a key protective factor for youth mental health.

Steel Teens

- 88% of Steel athletes report good or excellent levels of positivity.
- 89% of Steel athletes report good or excellent levels of our combined Growth Mindset and Grit scores.
- Over 88% of Steel athletes report proficiency or better in characteristics of good mental health (confidence, positivity, humility, self-control, concentration) which correlate to the Positive Mental Health Score. In comparison, 67.8% of U.S. college students (3,300 people) studied scored "Good" on the Positive Mental Health scale.

Positive Mental Health Metrics

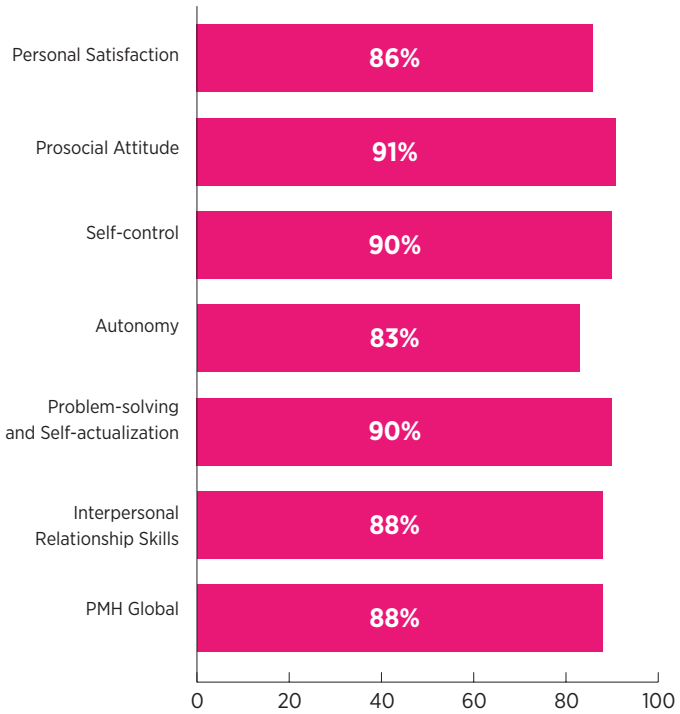
- Carefree and in good spirits
- Enjoyment in life
- Satisfaction in life
- General confidence
- Manage to fulfill personal needs
- Good physical and emotional condition
- Equipped to deal with life and its difficulties
- Find joy
- Calm and balanced

**as suggested by the APA and NIMH*

Steel Athletes — Self Evaluation and Positive Mental Health

Steel athlete evaluations are adapted related to characteristics of Positive Mental Health (PMH). Steel athletes scored incredibly high once again in 2025, and remained consistent with 2023 and 2024. The data indicates that our athletes are developing skills that relate to characteristics of Positive Mental Health as listed below. As with Grit & Growth Mindset, where Core Competencies scores are strong, so too are Positive Mental Health Indicators:

Steel Sports Core Competencies, Grit/Growth Mindset, & Core Values Adapted to Reflect Indicators of Positive Mental Health



Positive Mental Health and U.S. Teens

- Approximately 40% of U.S. adolescents report persistent emotional distress, including irritability, sadness, or hopelessness.
- More than 33% of U.S. teens report difficulty coping with stress.
- Over 40% of U.S. teens report symptoms of anxiety.

While some indicators have modestly improved since pandemic-era peaks, adolescent stress and emotional strain remain substantially higher than pre-pandemic levels.

(CDC Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 2023; SAMHSA National Survey on Drug Use and Health, 2024)

Positive Mental Health and Steel Kids

87% of Steel kids report they are able to manage emotions, failure appropriately.

86% of Steel kids report that they feel more happiness and less worry when they are playing with Steel Sports than most other activities.

We see a clear connection between high scores related to Core Competencies, Grit & Growth Mindset, and Positive Mental Health Characteristics. Positive Mental Health Characteristics are impacted by numerous known and unknown factors, factors beyond the control of youth sports coaches. However, Core Competencies are intentionally developed and integrated into The Lasorda Way curriculum which is then administered by highly trained coaches. Where curriculum and Lasorda Way coaches converge, a space for Core Competencies to develop is primed to impact athletes. As athletes improve these skills, so do they deepen and strengthen their characteristics of Positive Mental Health.

Once again, 2025 represents another year accomplishing consistent results. The spaces Steel coaches create for athletes arms them with life skills and characteristics of positive mental health which brings our mission to light.

"Building resilience is about developing the capacity to tolerate distress, to stay in and with a tough, challenging moment, to find our footing and our goodness even when we don't have confirmation of achievement or pending success."

— Dr. Becky Kennedy, clinical psychologist and founder of Good Inside

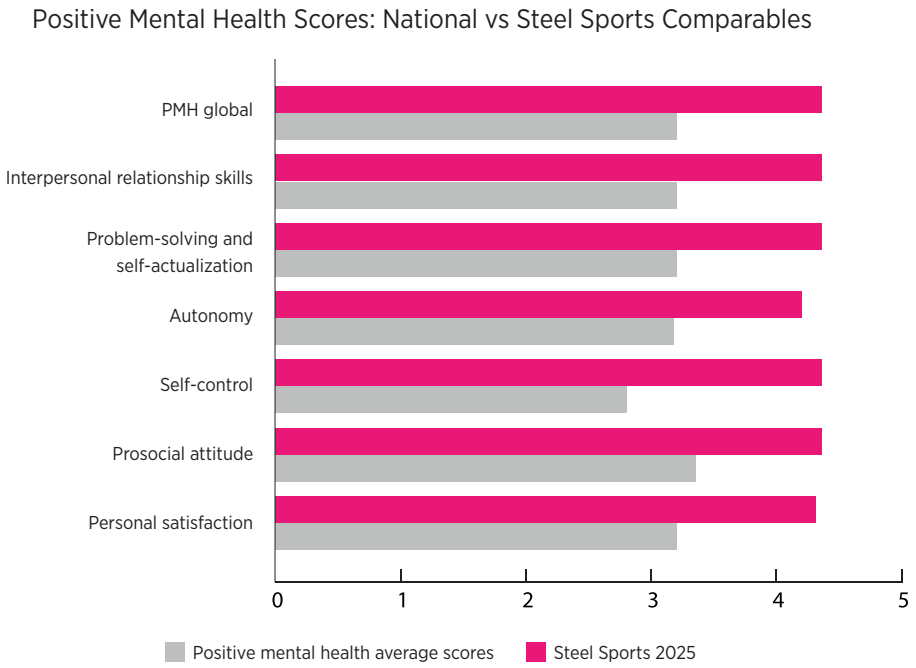


Figure 4: PMH Scores vs. Steel Sports (similar data)

Core Competency scores compare to similar metrics of Positive Mental Health (PMH) Scores. They are not identical (nor should they be) to mental health assessments, this is our closest comparison of Steel athletes with U.S. youth mental health data. These data are not "apples to apples" but rather are a loose representation of Steel versus the national average.

Scores we compared:

Positive Mental Health average scores	Steel Data
Factor 1—Personal Satisfaction	Proud of achievements, Effort over outcomes, humility
Factor 2—Prosocial Attitude	Core Values, Positivity
Factor 3—Self-control	Self-control, Appropriate Response to Failure
Factor 4—Autonomy	Leadership, Concentration
Factor 5—Problem-solving and Self-actualization	Enjoying Challenges, Effort over outcomes
Factor 6—Interpersonal Relationship Skills	Teamwork, Respect
PMH Global	Combined Core Competencies

Figure 5: Comparable Data from PMH and Steel

Steel coaches integrate various strategies to connect and support Steel athletes, for examples:

- **The Traffic Light System:** When players arrive and during free play the coach should 'assess' each player's character, and if any players arrive as red then the coach is responsible for ensuring they leave as green. They can do this by offering more positive reinforcement than usual and lessening the challenge so players may feel more success than usual.
- **Challenging every play:** Coaches follow the guidelines to ensure players feel successful without the practices being unrealistic. It's good that players are unsuccessful sometimes but balancing this is vital for continued confidence.

"By intentionally assessing where athletes are each day and adjusting support and challenge accordingly, our coaches create environments where kids feel safe, confident, and capable — leaving every session stronger than when they arrived."

— Ian Hughes, Senior VP Staff & Player Development

Steel Kids' Perspectives: Growth Mindset, Grit, and Free Play

96% of **Steel kids** report that they enjoy the challenging aspects of their sport and 97% report that they feel proud when they complete difficult tasks. These results indicate grit and resilience.

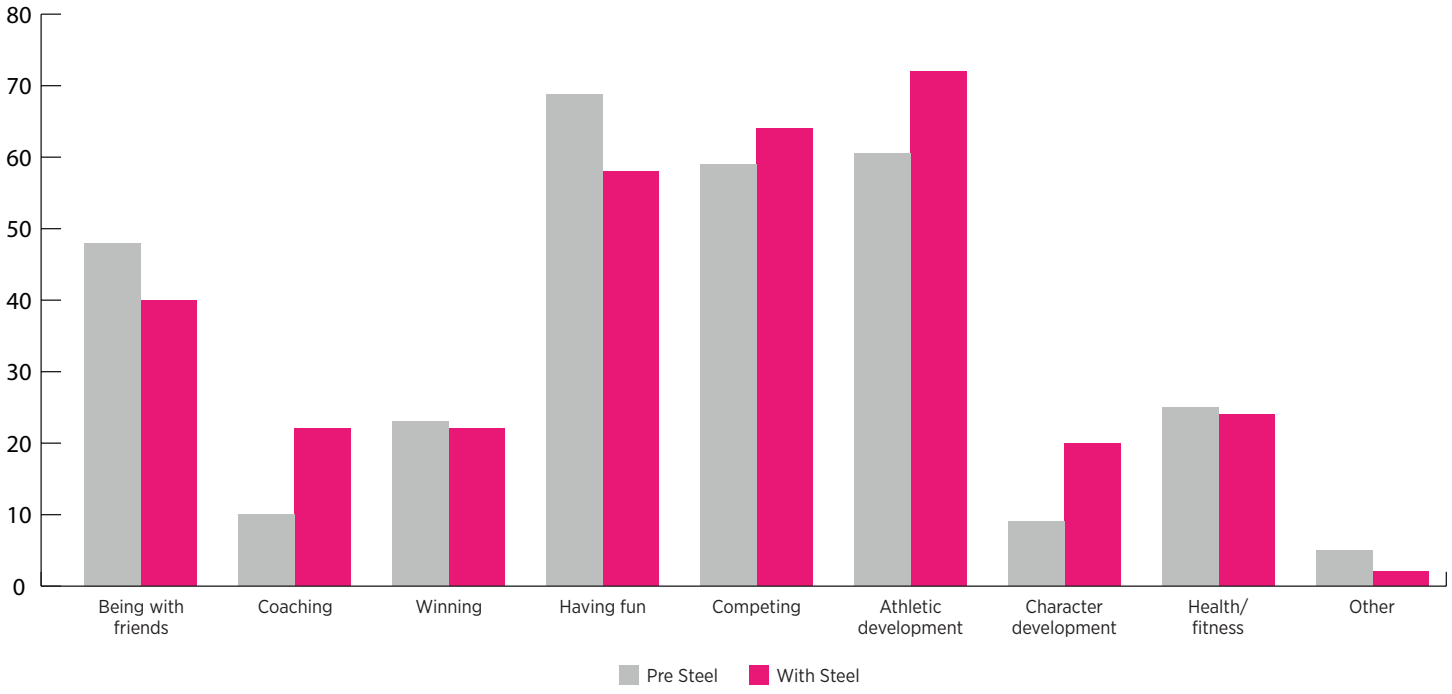
Additionally, three years in a row, **Steel kids** cite Athletic Development, Competing, and Having Fun, respectively as the top 3 reasons "Why they play."

"Why I Play"

Steel athletes repeat, year over year, the same 3 top priorities when asked why they play. Once again, Athletic Development, Competing, and Having Fun top the charts respectively. It comes as no surprise that athletes want to improve and compete, and it serves as a Kids First reminder as well as a call to action to ensure youth athletes are having fun.

In 2024 and 2025 consecutively, the importance of coaching and the importance of character development each nearly doubled in importance for Steel kids when they joined their Steel team. Coaching is a universal thread in the player feedback. Steel kids also report genuine enjoyment, social connection, and both athletic and character developments as priorities and they highlight the impact of coaching throughout.

Reasons Kids Play Pre-Steel vs with Steel



Growth Mindset

- 80% of **Steel kids** report that they value effort more than outcomes indicating that they take pride in the process, demonstrating Growth Mindset.
- Dweck: 40% of people have a growth mindset. (Radford, 2022) Steel kids are cultivating growth mindset that will serve as a lifelong practice and developed skill.
- Global Study on Growth Mindset by Program for International Student Assessment says 70% of US high school kids show a growth mindset (Program for International Student Assessment, 2018)
- Growth Mindset > "positive effects on academic outcomes, mental health, and social functioning, especially when interventions are delivered to people expected to benefit the most [under-resourced groups]."
- Data from the **OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA 2022)** demonstrate that growth mindset is most strongly associated with persistence, engagement, and academic performance among developing adolescents—particularly those in the middle range of achievement, where outcomes are still highly malleable. These findings suggest that growth mindset is especially relevant in environments where youth are actively learning to respond to difficulty rather than simply demonstrating fixed levels of performance.

Steel athletes operate in ideal conditions for Growth Mindset. Through The Lasorda Way, athletes are routinely exposed to challenge, constructive feedback, and intentional reflection. As a result, growth mindset is not taught as a slogan or isolated lesson, but reinforced through daily coaching behaviors, effort based language, and structured opportunities to learn from mistakes.

89% Grit/ Growth Mindset core

Athlete comments indicate that Growth Mindset is strongly linked to effort, persistence, and resilience.

87% of **Steel kids** report appropriate response to Failure.

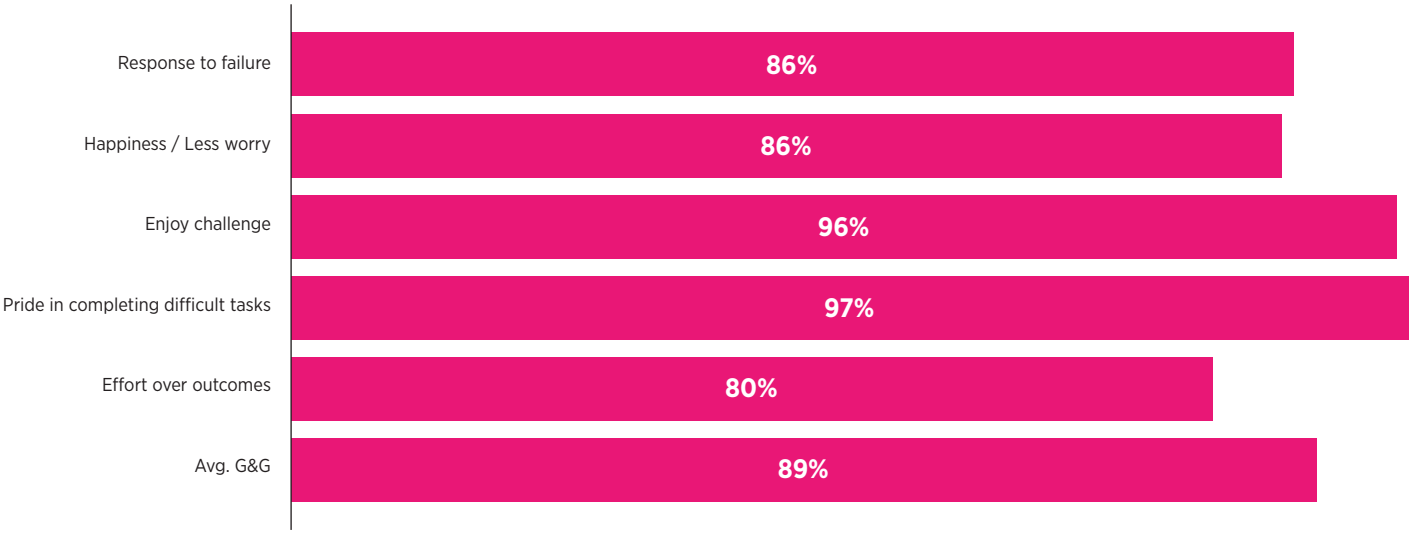
88% find the postgame debrief as valuable—fostering learning and trust and relying on the feedback to improve.

Response to Failure: Athletes most commonly highlight the following skills:

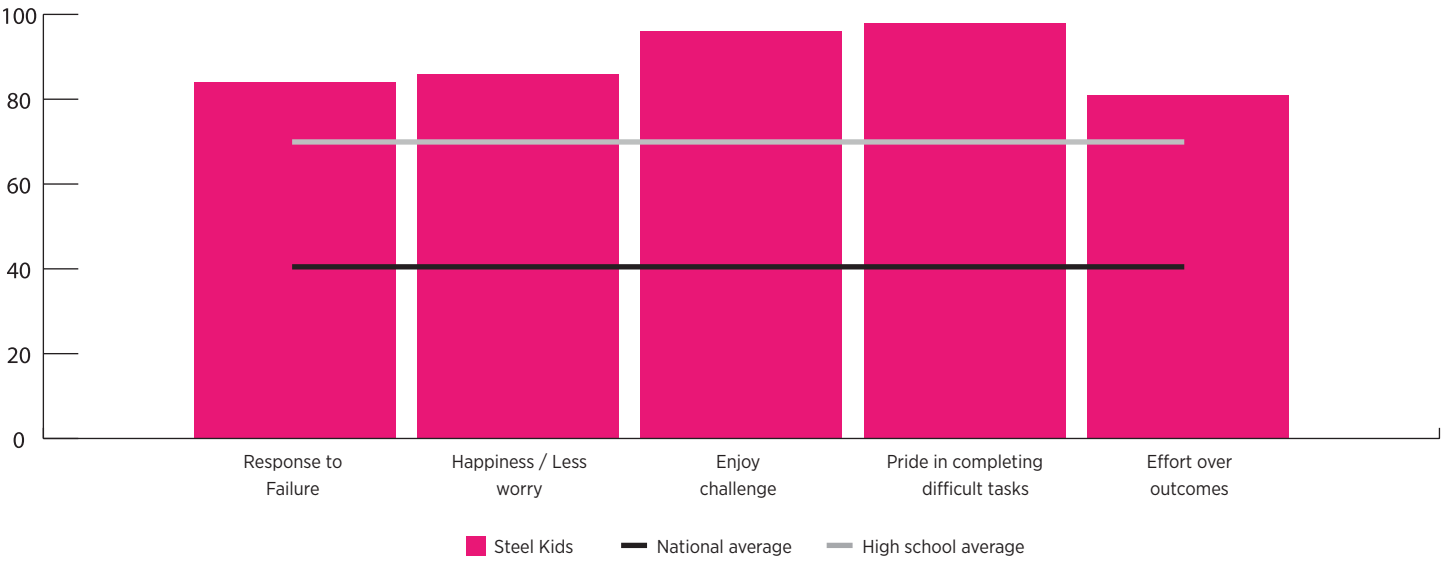
- Failure is an opportunity to reflect, learn and grow
- Positive mistake culture – failure is simply information and necessary for growth
- Improved resilience, maturity, and mental toughness
- Accountability and practice bouncing back leads to increased confidence, emotional recovery, and physical adjustment.

Athletes emphasize the belief that effort will lead to improvement. They cite reflection, intentionality, and positivity as areas that stoke Growth Mindset.

Grit & Growth Mindset



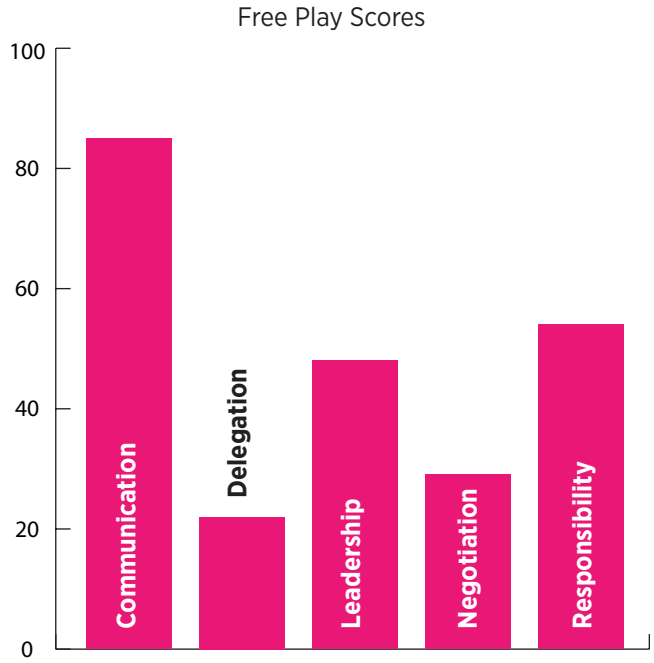
Characteristics of Growth Mindset



Free Play

Steel teams practice Free Play prior to each training session. During Free Play, kids have full freedom to play in whatever way they want—they self-govern, negotiate, think strategically and creatively while developing autonomy and leadership skills.

- 93% of Steel kids (up from 90% in 2024 and 76% in 2023) value their experience with Free Play (0 negative scores).
- When asked to select any/all skills developed through Free Play, Steel athletes ranked the following:
  - Communication 84%
  - Responsibility 56%
  - Leadership 45%
  - Negotiation 29%
  - Delegation 21%



Free Play Notes

Athletes were asked to "select all that apply" regarding which areas of skill development they gained from Free Play. A total of 1,358 athletes responded. Across multiple years of data, athlete responses remain consistent and align closely with current research on unstructured, child led play.

- Fun/Enjoyment: Specifically in unstructured play kids are able to "play free."
- Freedom and Creativity: Free Play increases intrinsic motivation, exploration, and creativity. It lowers performance anxiety and performance anxiety while maintaining engagement.
- Confidence Building: Safe opportunities to take risks, learn from failure, and respond better to setbacks—key mechanisms shown to strengthen resilience and emotional regulation.
- Transfer Skills into Games: Great way to warm up and transition mentally and physically into practice. Research indicates that Free Play improves attention, executive functioning, and readiness for structured learning, making it an effective cognitive and emotional warm-up.
- Belonging and Team Chemistry: Free Play fosters autonomy, peer connection, and shared ownership, which are strongly associated with positive mental health and reduced anxiety. Free Play is a protective factor for positive mental health.

A 2023 review in the *Journal of Pediatrics* identifies the decline in independent, unstructured activity as a contributing factor to rising youth anxiety and emotional distress, emphasizing that free play builds self-control, emotional regulation, and resilience. Kids need Free Play now, more than ever.

"Free play leads to a more supportive and inclusive culture, develops responsibility and empathy, and reduces behavior problems."

— Lenore Skenazy, author of Free-Range Kids, president of Let Grow

Relating to the Larger World of Youth Sports

Where most youth sports organizations focus their efforts singularly such as on coach-training, access, or programs, Steel Sports is unique in its multi-faceted approach. Steel Sports centers on Kids First as a youth sports organization and is anchored by the coaching system, ongoing coach development, and impact measurement as integral parts of the organization—the approach is currently the only of its kind.

In comparison to similar organizations, Steel Sports has built coach training and on-field work into the foundation of the organization, keeping the entire coaching system in house from philosophy to implementation. While other organizations improve the culture and landscape of youth sports, their principles often have limited breadth and few follow-up opportunities. Steel Sports offers a full season of coaching and Lasorda Way implementation followed by measurement, analysis, and data-based suggestions for change which create a cyclical approach that continuously evolves and elevates the player experience. While many youth sports organizations train coaches, Steel Sports closes the loop (train > implement > observe > refine > measure) which is a differentiator because coaches then improve themselves and the impact they make on their players. The consistency provided in the learning environment which includes in-depth online modules, live/virtual training, annual continuing education expectations, coach mentoring with observation/feedback, and regional Coach Developers leads to coach growth and, consequently, player growth.

In short, Steel Sports boasts high level coach development, consistent Lasorda Way implementation across all sports and regions, measurable data (Core Values, Core Competencies, Growth Mindset, Grit, Positive Mental Health comparables, and Athlete development), and multi-year results that depict the superior growth and development of youth athletes when compared to their counterparts.

Conclusion

The 2025 Impact Report highlights consistent results for the third year in a row. The data illustrate the significant and measurable positive influences of The Lasorda Way on Steel Athletes. Coaches, trained in The Lasorda Way apply the Steel Sports Coaching System with intention and care to maximize character development, promote the Core Values, and build leaders through sports. Steel Sports continues to cultivate athletes who are prepared for success on the field, in the classroom, and in their communities. The growth of a child as they progress through youth sports as a Steel athlete is marked by both athletic achievement and character development, they lean on wisdom from trained coaches, and they expand to reach new goals. Steel athletes are thriving, resilient, and inspired young people growing into our future leaders.

Key takeaways from this year's analysis include:

- **Strong Athlete Development:** 95% of Steel athletes report a deep understanding and application of core values, including teamwork, respect, integrity, and commitment.
- **High Academic Success:** With a 100% high school graduation rate and a 98% college matriculation rate, Steel athletes consistently exceed national averages.
- **Positive Mental Health and Leadership Growth:** Over 88% of athletes demonstrate strong mental resilience, self-confidence, and the ability to process constructive feedback.
- **The Value of Free Play:** 90% of athletes appreciate the unstructured learning environment provided by Free Play, which fosters autonomy, responsibility, and strategic thinking.

Steel Sports remains committed to our Kids First philosophy, ensuring that each athlete's experience promotes lifelong success. Through continued investment in our coaching methods, free play, and character development, we aim to empower kids beyond the field for generations to come.



“While we are very competitive, our coach never puts winning above our core values. She sets clear expectations for effort, discipline, and how we act, and she always follows through. Beyond soccer, she teaches us important life skills like responsibility, resilience, teamwork, and confidence, which really matter during our teenage years. She truly cares about us, and because of that, we compete hard, grow as people, and learn lessons that go far beyond the field.”



“Coach promotes positive coaching through an athlete-centered philosophy that places each player’s growth and well-being at the forefront. He consistently offers praise and encouragement, helping athletes build confidence while feeling valued and supported. This positive environment empowers athletes to take risks, improve their skills, and continue growing both on and off the field.”

When players come off the field, coach always has something to communicate with them, whether that is encouragement or a teaching point. The most impressive part is he has something for every single one of them, not just the ones who are struggling or the ones who are doing very well. It's very reassuring to know that our coach cares about each of his players that much."

