

Myths of Time: The Wild West

Lesson Four

Myth #1. Bank-Robbing Outlaws Ruled the West

The Myth:

Black Bart, the Dalton Gang, and Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid all were famous for their daring robberies. They could take entire fortunes from banks that had slightly less security than a modern hot dog stand.

And why not? Lawlessness ruled, vaults didn't exist, and criminals didn't have to worry about anyone trying to stop them. The banks might as well have left their big white bags of gold sitting out on the porch. *Ye Haul!*



The Reality:

Research can find evidence of only about 8 true bank heists, and that's across 15 states in 40 years! Eight. As a point of comparison, in 2011 alone, more than \$30 million was stolen and just over 100 people killed or injured in some 5,000 robberies of financial institutions reported to the FBI from across the nation. In 2015 alone over 4,000 bank robberies were committed.

Even if we'd never seen a Western movie in our lives 8 bank robberies in 40 years would seem like a low

number.



So, why weren't there more? There are several things to consider. First, towns back in those days were much smaller, with the sheriff's office, saloon, general store, and bank usually clustered together for convenience. This one-stop social-needs block usually made up the dead center of town. Being that the sheriff's office was usually no more than a few doors down, you were probably pulling your big heist within earshot of the law. When you walk out the front door with the loot, there's a good chance you might have the sheriff waiting for you, having grown curious from the screams, shouts, and general mayhem.

Second, the banks actually weren't that easy to get in and out of. Old West buildings were usually built pretty close together, meaning the bank would be flanked by other buildings, while a reinforced back wall would keep anyone from getting through the back way. Now, the most famous robberies -- the jobs pulled by Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid -- were actually true. But that's the point -- they got famous for a reason. They were doing what nobody else was crazy enough to do.

But for everyday criminals, common targets were often trains and stagecoaches because they were more isolated, easier to get into, and easier to escape. So why bother with a bank, which would be a suicide mission in comparison?



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Myth #3. Cowboys Are an American Creation

The Myth:

One reason Americans have always been so in love with the Old West is that it's so distinctly *American*. Today, if you find a political rally of people proclaiming themselves to be patriots, you can bet you'll probably find cowboy hats in that crowd. The more of a cowboy you are, the more American you are. Even Teddy Roosevelt got in on the act by calling himself the "[cowboy candidate](#)."

The Reality:

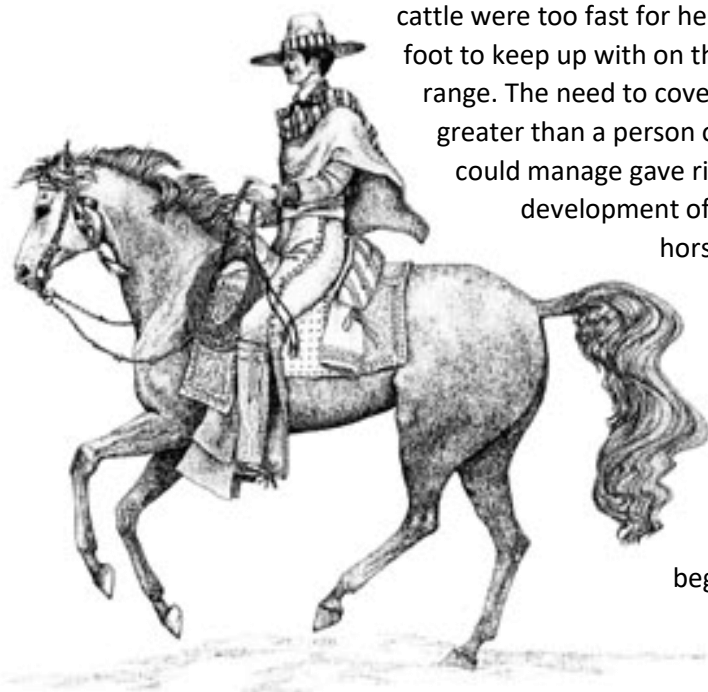


Sorry Teddy! Cowboys weren't an American invention at all. In fact, they precede Plymouth Rock by some 20 years, meaning cowboys and their way of life are older than America itself. Long ago before cattle came to Texas, before George Washington crossed the Delaware, before the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock cowboys rode the range in Spanish Mexico. The original cowboys were Mexican cattlemen known as *vaqueros*, and they are literally everything you most likely imagine a cowboy to be.

The 1494 arrival of cattle and horses in Hispaniola led to a need for skilled and rugged horsemen able to control the (eventually) vast herd. The plentiful pastures of Europe were almost non-existent in the Southwest and in Mexico. The small fenced pastures the Spanish were used to wouldn't work in a territory where a single cow needs many acres of grazing land to sustain it. In addition,

cattle were too fast for herders on foot to keep up with on the open range. The need to cover distances greater than a person on foot could manage gave rise to the development of the

horseback-mounted vaquero.



In the service of wealthy

Spanish conquistadors, Mexican ranch hands began herding cattle, often riding barefoot. They soon developed and perfected the skills for this dangerous work and became expert horsemen. Hundreds of years later the vaqueros

shared their expertise with the inexperienced cowboys of the American West, who adopted their techniques and their distinctive clothing, tools, and even lingo. After all they came up with all of the cowboy lingo, including "bronco," "lariat," and even "stampede." Vaqueros rode the long-haul cattle drives, and their wide brimmed sombreros were likely the precursor to cowboy hats. They also wore chaps, held rodeos, and lived the life of a cowboy in relative anonymity for some 200 years.

When Americans moved westward, it was these vaqueros who knew the land and wildlife enough to help teach the future American cowboys everything they knew. The settlers in turn did the right thing and outright stole the entire culture, including the title of "vaqueros," which was turned by English speakers into "buckaroos."



The Forgotten Cowboys

But it's not like vaqueros went the way of the cowboy at the time, either. On cinema screens and paperback covers, the cowboys of old were heroic, hard-bitten and -- almost always -- white. Despite what Hollywood would have you believe, not every cowboy in the West (or human being, for that matter) was a white male.



Bass Reeves was one of the first African-American law men.

In reality, the American West of the 1800s was traversed by an assortment of black, white, Mexican, and Native American cattle hands. Black cowboys existed, men like Bill Pickett, a champion rodeo rider who invented bulldogging, a technique where he would jump from a horse on to a steer and take the animal down by biting on its lip. Some black and mixed-race cowboys traced their citizenship / freedom to colonial times, others bought themselves from their masters, some were freed by law or proclamation, and others "purchased" their freedom with their feet.

The west is full of tales of heroes of color. Nat Love, Addison Jones, Bronco Sam, Charley Willis and George Glen are just a few of the most notable Black cowboys. We can also find tales of the heroic African American cowgirl of the old west - Stagecoach Mary Fields.

Bass Reeves, a black lawman who worked for 32 years as a U.S. Marshall, is subject to more folktales than Paul Bunyan. Born to slave parents in 1838 in Crawford County Arkansas, Bass Reeves would become the first black U.S. Deputy Marshal west of the Mississippi River and one of the greatest frontier heroes in our nation's history. He supposedly apprehended 8,000 plus felons, used disguises (Sometimes appearing as a cowboy, farmer, gunslinger, or outlaw himself.), he always wore two Colt

pistols, butt forward for a fast draw. Ambidextrous, he rarely missed his mark, had a Native American sidekick (U.S. Marshals were mandated to take at least one posseman with them when they were in the field to help with arrests—along with a cook and a guard), and went through his whole career without being wounded (despite statements that his hat and belt buckle were both shot off on separate occasions.)

Though Reeves could not read or write it did not curb his effectiveness in bringing back criminals. Before he headed out, he would have someone read him the warrants and memorize which was which. When asked to produce the warrant, he never failed to pick out the correct one.

The 1956 John Ford film *The Searchers*, based on Alan Le May's novel, was said to be partly inspired by the exploits of Brit Johnson, a black cowboy slave whose wife and two daughters were captured by the



Comanche in 1865 (his son was killed). Freed by his owner he was able to secure their freedom with the help of Esahabitu, a visionary Comanche leader, and the family returned to Texas. [In the film, John Wayne plays as a Civil War veteran who spends years looking for his niece who has been abducted by Indians.]

Britt used his renown to build a business as a freighter between Weatherford and Forts Richardson, Belknap and Griffin. He died heroically January 24, 1871 defending a wagon train he was leading through Young County when it was attacked by 25 Kiowas. Britt was famous as a crack shot with his 16-shot Henry rifle. When his body was found, there were 173 spent shell casings scattered around him.

Contemporary records are rare but historians now estimate that up to one in four **Texan** cowboys on the trails were African American while one in three cowboys were Mexican vaqueros. Native Americans would also help move the cattle with their white, Mexican, and black brethren (and sisters in some cases). It was a rainbow cowboy coalition! Except if you were Chinese. Then you were probably building railroads in horrible conditions.

Did You Know?

During the 17th and 18th century, many slaves were displaced from areas of Western Africa where cattle herding cultures -- as depicted in 4,000 year old cave paintings at Tassili n'Ajjer, in the south of modern-day Algeria -- had existed for millennia.

But historians say that those who became cowboys in the 19th century joined a new cultural tradition -- developed in the company of their Mexican, European, and

Stagecoach Mary

When people hear of cowboys or pioneers, they usually think of tough, brave men. However, there were also many women pioneers who paved the way west. Among the best known is "Stagecoach Mary" Fields who began her life as a slave in TN. Mary, who stood over six feet tall, was as strong as any man, very good at fixing anything, could read and write, and was incredibly fast with a pistol.

Born sometime around 1812, Mary began life as a slave in Hickman County, Tenn. Few facts, however, are known about her early years. According to some historians, she was owned by Judge Dunn and grew up on his family farm. She became friends with his daughter, Dolly, who was around the same age.

According to some reports, Mary later received a letter from Dolly, who had become a nun and was now known as Sister Amadeus. Mary heard her friend was ill with pneumonia and went to nurse her at the convent. Mary soon became the foreman, or boss, of the other workers at the school.

When Mary heard that the United States Postal Service was looking for someone to deliver mail from the town of Cascade, Montana to families in the surrounding areas, she applied for the job. Even though she was about 60 years old at the time, Mary proved herself the fastest applicant to hitch a team of six horses and was hired. Thus, Mary became the second woman and the first African American woman to work for the United States Postal Service. Mary drove the mail stagecoach along the trails that linked Cascade to the remote homesteads. Mary loved the job, despite the many dangers and difficulties including thieves and wolves.

In the winter, heavy snowfalls plunged the trails under drifts. On several occasions, Mary's horses could not cross the drifts. Determined to do her job, she left the horses behind and walked alone to deliver the mail. Once she walked 10 miles back to the depot.

Mary continued to deliver the mail until she was almost 70 years old, earning the nickname of "Stagecoach Mary." Then she decided to "slow down." the nuns at the mission helped her open a laundry service in Cascade

"Stagecoach Mary" Fields broke all boundaries of race, gender and age. She was a true pioneer.



Native American counterparts -- with different breeds of cattle and new techniques.

During this time farmers began searching for undeveloped land to harvest in the West. As a result, skilled workers in the realm of herding and ranching became in high demand, contributing to a vast majority of Blacks migrating to the Western hemisphere.

For enslaved Africans, this was just the tip of the iceberg, as the West not only provided an opportunity to receive higher wages but also offered a chance at sustaining a better life, supposedly free from the bondage, refuge and captivity of slavery. But this is not to say racial discrimination did not exist.

Life for a black cowboy was tough, explains Michael Searles, Emeritus Assistant Professor of History at Augusta State University, who has edited an anthology of writing on the subject.

"Black cowboys were sometimes expected to do ... more than their white counterpart -- in other words, some of

the roughest work."

"Breaking of stock (taming horses) and getting horses ready to ride each morning was often the work of the black cowboy -- where there were black cowboys --

and when they had to cross a swollen river to move cattle ... black cowboys were the first to cross that river."

"Many black cowboys, when they were slaves, weren't treated as you'd think a traditional slave would be treated, because a cowboy needed a lot more independence," said Searles.

Even after the abolition of slavery, prejudice and discrimination were still common -- but black cowboys could expect a better relationship with white Americans than many.



Nate Love, also know as Deadwood Dick and "the most famous black cowboy of them all," was born a slave in in 1854 in Davidson County, Tennessee.

Why did Hollywood choose to so misrepresent the true racial diversity of the West?

"The American West is often considered the birthplace of America, where Americans were distinct from their European counterparts," says Searles.

"The West was where white men were able to show their courage. But if a black man could be heroic and have all the attributes that you give to the best qualities in men, then how was it possible to treat a black man as subservient or as a non-person?"

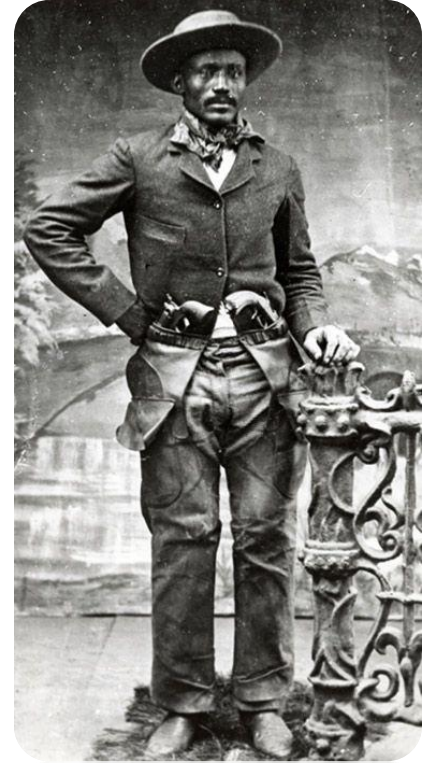
Ferguson talks about a "cowboy code" of equal responsibility, teamwork and mutual protection binding today's cowboys and their black and white ancestors. Mike agrees that a kind of loyalty developed between cowboys of different races -- but suggests that cowboys were initially united by necessity.

"If you've got nine or 10 cowboys on a cattle drive, you are interdependent with the folk who are riding with you -- they can either save your life or they can let you die.

"There are times when you really need the assistance of another cowboy. That was not the place to be too prejudiced or too hostile to the cowboy riding next to you," says Ferguson, the filmmaker.

Asked how the image of the black cowboy disappeared from popular culture, the finger gets pointed at the Western movie business of the mid-20th century. "Hollywood played a major part in dismissing the role of black cowboys. In 99% of Western cowboy films, there is no black cowboy."

"America was a divided country -- segregation -- Hollywood played their part. Compare Clint Eastwood or John Wayne to the black cowboys. It just doesn't fit the image. Black cowboy. A hero." Was this right?



Showdown! (A.k.a. Grudgebau!)

According to legend cowboys played a lot of games and had some hot tempers (they might even have held grudges!) Now, that may or not be true, but playing games (and reviewing math skills) is always fun to do!

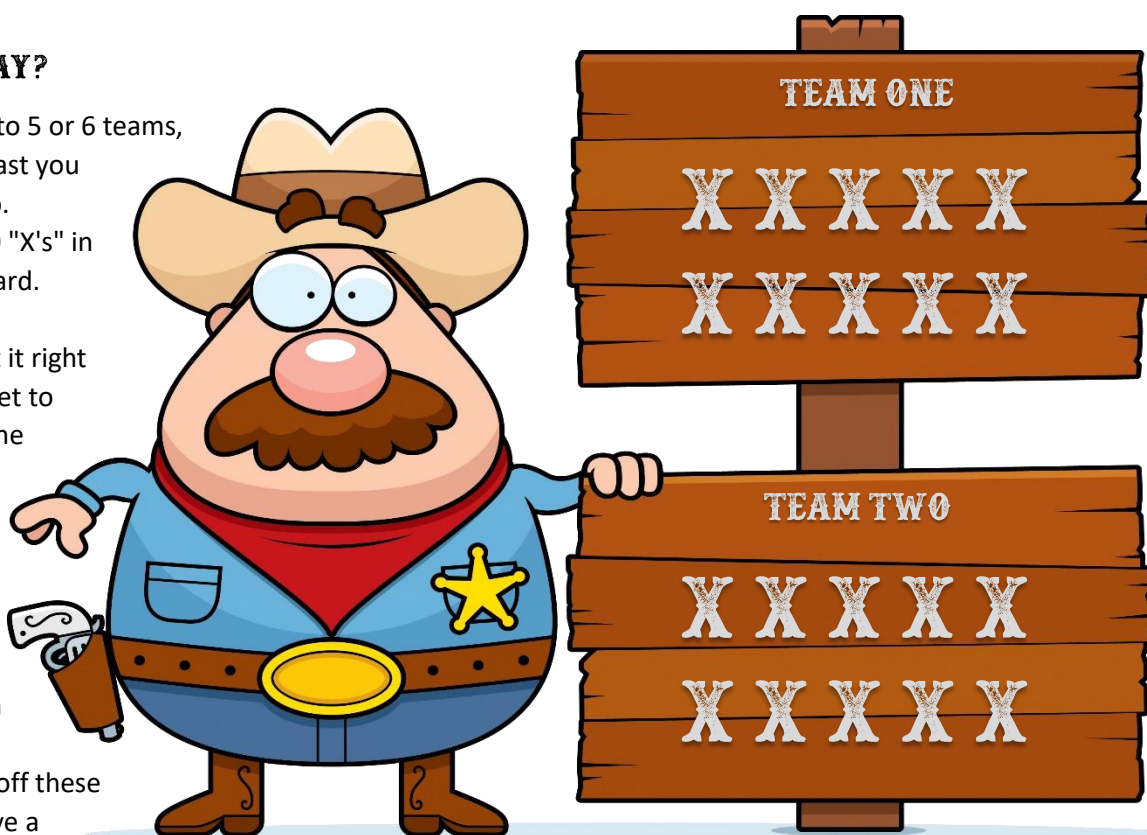
Showdown is a quick go to game you can use with any set of questions or math skills that takes minimal set up, materials, or prep. The object of the game is to have the most X's left on the board at the end.

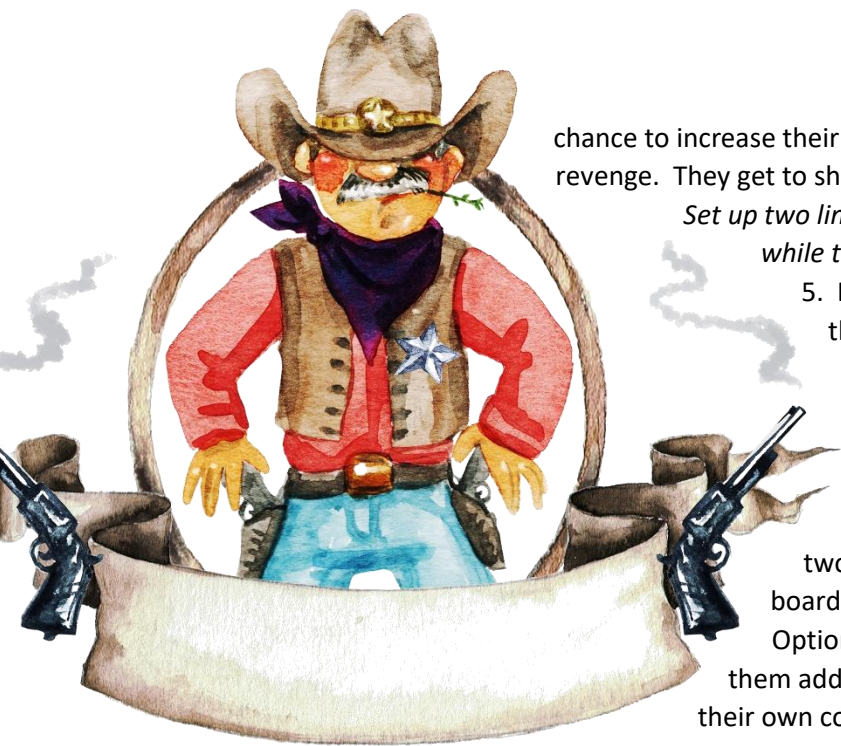
MATERIALS:

- Math/subject grade-level appropriate questions (ex. flashcards and questions from the topics just discussed)
- Whiteboard
- Markers/eraser
- Masking tape
- Paperwad balls/ball
- Two targets (Ex. trash cans)

HOW DO YOU PLAY?

1. Split your class into 5 or 6 teams, depending on how fast you want the game to go.
2. Each team gets 10 "X's" in their area on the board.
3. Each group gets a question. If they get it right they automatically get to erase two X's from the board. They can take it from one team or split it between their opposing teams. They **cannot** take X's from themselves!
4. Before they take off these X's, though, they have a





chance to increase their ability to get the other teams to desire revenge. They get to shoot the Nerf ball/paperwad.

Set up two lines with masking tape. One is a two point line while the other is a three pointer.

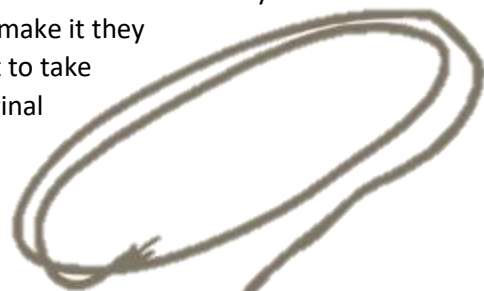
5. If they shoot from the two point line and get it in, they can take four X's off the board. If they go from the three point line, and make it in, they can take five off the board. If they

don't make it they still get to take the original

two off the board.

Option: let them add 1 X for their own correct

answer.



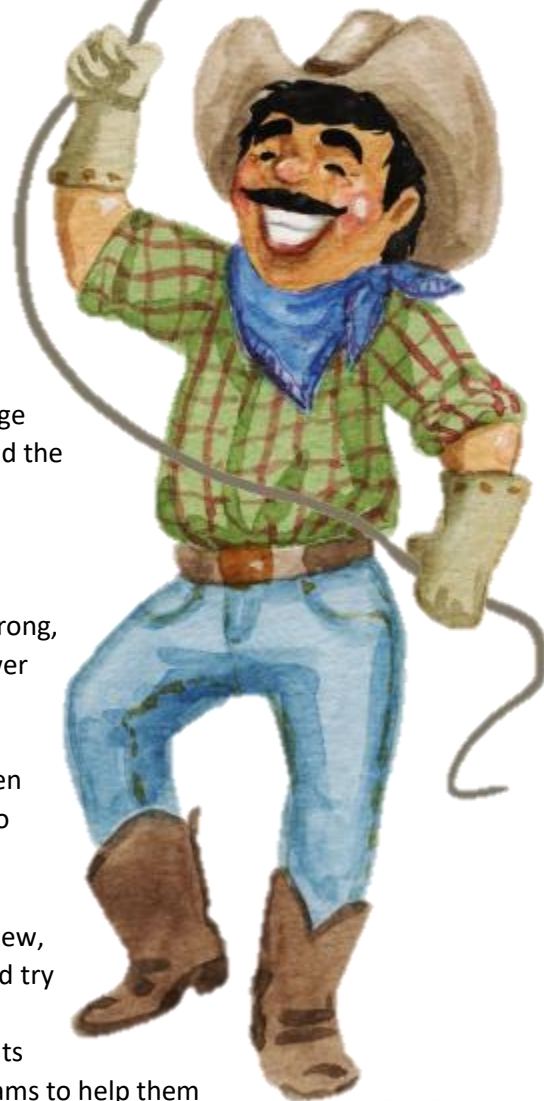
NOTE: 'DEAD' OR REVIVED?

When a team is knocked off **they are still in the game**. These teams still take turns even though they are 'dead'. To get back on the board they need to get the question right and make the basket. If they do this they can earn four or five X's back on the board (depending on from where they shoot). This allows them to stay involved, take part in the review and not shut down.

As far as removing other team's Xs, getting back on the board is privilege enough. They can't remove X's until the next turn. Allowing them to add the 4-5 points back sometimes puts them at an advantage already!

ADDITIONAL ELEMENTS & VARIATIONS:

- If the team whose turn it is, gets the answer to the question wrong, every other team has 30 seconds to try to get the correct answer to try to steal points. If any other team gets it correct, they get to shoot the basketball in order to see if they can steal 2 or 3 points from the teams of their choice. If they miss the shot, then they do not get to take away any points. It allows for the ball to get shot more, and it helped make sure every single team was participating in every problem.
- To keep EVERYONE on each team engaged throughout the review, have one student at a time come to the front, hold the ball, and try to answer the question for two points before getting the opportunity to take a shot and earn extra points. BUT if students can't answer the questions on their own, they can ask their teams to help them



out with an answer, but then the point value of the original question drops to one point instead of two.

TIPS:

Kids will want to make alliances. With really good natured classes let this process naturally happen. If you have an immature or meaner class, try to stop this for fear of bullying. If you have one kid that takes the "attacks" personally really reiterate that the object of the game is to knock everyone else off and people are going to get upset but that is okay (hence the name GRUDGE ball).

