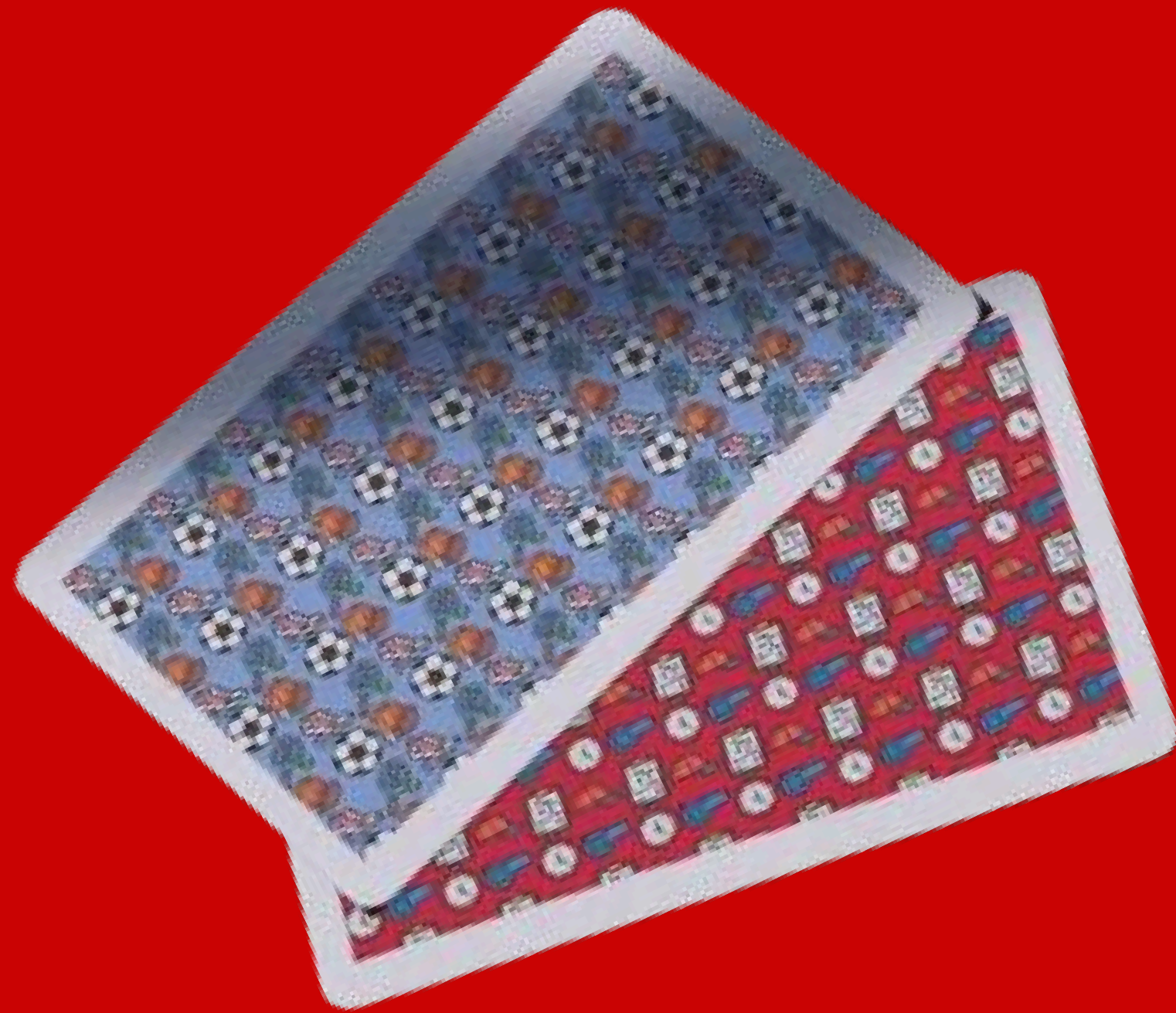


Empathy IS a contact sport, especially within collegiate athletics.

FAIR SHAKE



MDes
December 2025
Intro to Design Issues
Betsaida Sanchez

The Inquiry

"Can role playing trigger a collaborative discussion that moves from passive learning to empathetic problem-solving regarding the issues facing student-athletes?"



Literature Review

Methodology background

"Taking on the role of various stakeholders allows team members to see through others' eyes, empathize, and call attention to potential harms." (Ballard et al., 2019)

"Games are well-suited to this because they allow players to inhabit the roles of other people in a uniquely immersive way." (Belman, 2010)

"Practicing empathy through games may help to reduce conflict and aggression towards others." (Schrier & Farber, 2021)

"Cognitive empathy refers to the experience of intentionally taking another person's point of view." (Belman, 2010)

College Athletics Insights

"The enhanced media attention of college sport has heightened the commercialization of the enterprise. In turn, pressure for coaches, athletics administrators, and ultimately student-athletes is at an all-time high to win in the athletics arena." (Navarro, 2015)

"The rules and regulations of these agencies are designed to control athletes and athletics, but the athlete himself has no voice in their design." (Renick, n.d.)

"Athletics department practitioners must continue to consider the specialized needs of a highly diverse 21st century student-athlete population as they make programmatic decisions." (Navarro, 2015)



THE GAME

The Pre-Game

Methods of Data collection: Pre-Post Surveys + Contextual Inquiry

What I am tracking:

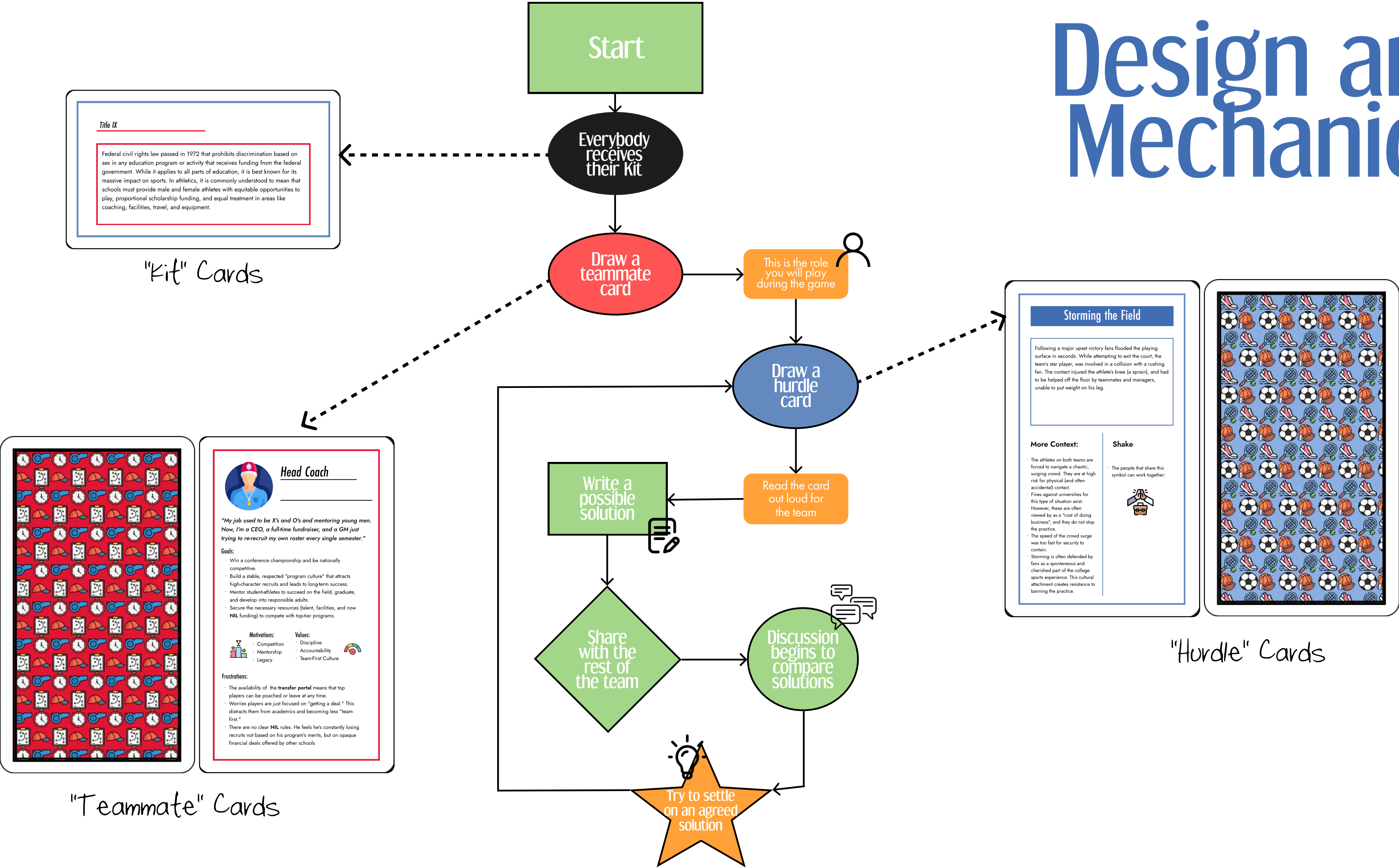
- ☐ Can people get into the Role Play scenario?
- ☐ Do they take into account the athlete?
- ☐ What type of solutions arise from the problems presented?
- ☐ Did their knowledge about the subject change?



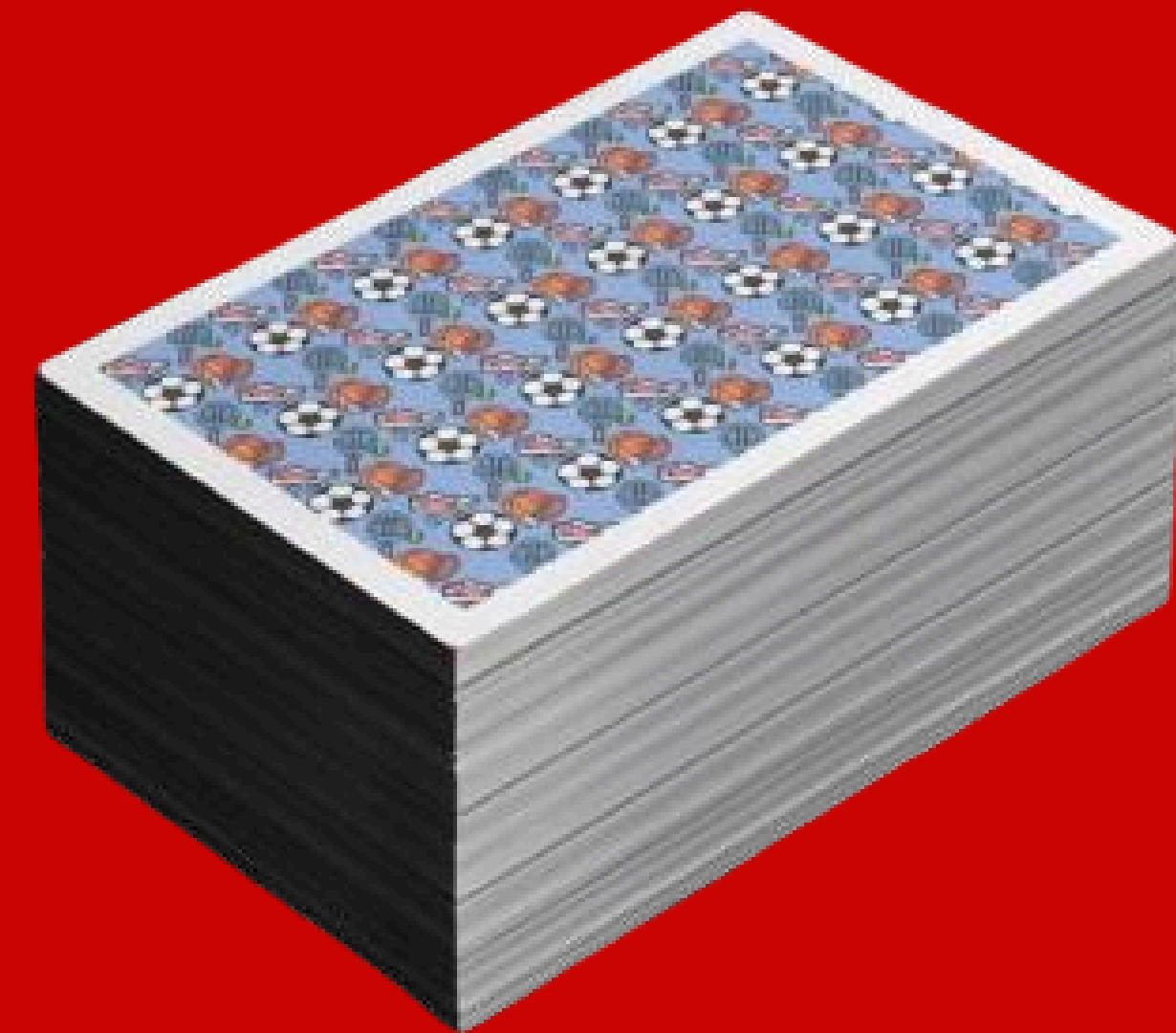
Methodology Inspiration: Judgment Call

“While the idea of a game about ethics may be counter intuitive, we found that Judgment Call makes this serious and somewhat daunting topic fun and accessible.” (Ballard et al., 2019)

Design and Mechanics



THE RESULTS



Pre Game

Who were the players?

- Six Participants
- Different genders and ages
- Students of the Master of Design Program

How was it played?

- 2 rounds of around 5-10 minutes each

How did they rate their knowledge previous to playing the game?



The world of College athletics



Sports in Collegiate Settings



Confidence to discuss and consider difficult topics

Post Game



Organization
Authority Team Dynamics
AWARENESS Roles
Challenges NCAA Title IX Responsibility
New Terms

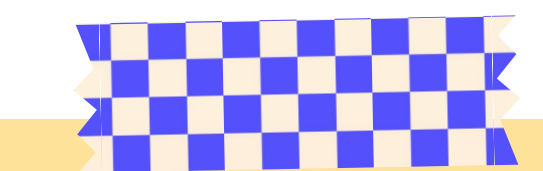
Personal Reflections

What I observed during the game

- At the start of the game, as participants were learning their roles, they spontaneously brought up sports.
- There was an immediate difference in engagement: some participants were quickly immersed, while others had difficulty connecting. However, their investment grew significantly as the game progressed and they learned more.
- During ideation and solution sharing, conversations between the game's roles led to the unexpected emergence of new ideas.
- For every problem posed by the "hurdle" cards, participants drew upon their personal beliefs and related real-life experiences, using these insights to guide their responses.

What did I learn

On a personal level, I gained a new level of understanding and empathy for both the challenges faced by student-athletes and the difficult decisions made by stakeholders. As highlighted in the literature review and discussions with Dr. Jung, acquiring knowledge facilitates cognitive empathy, allowing us to relate to others.

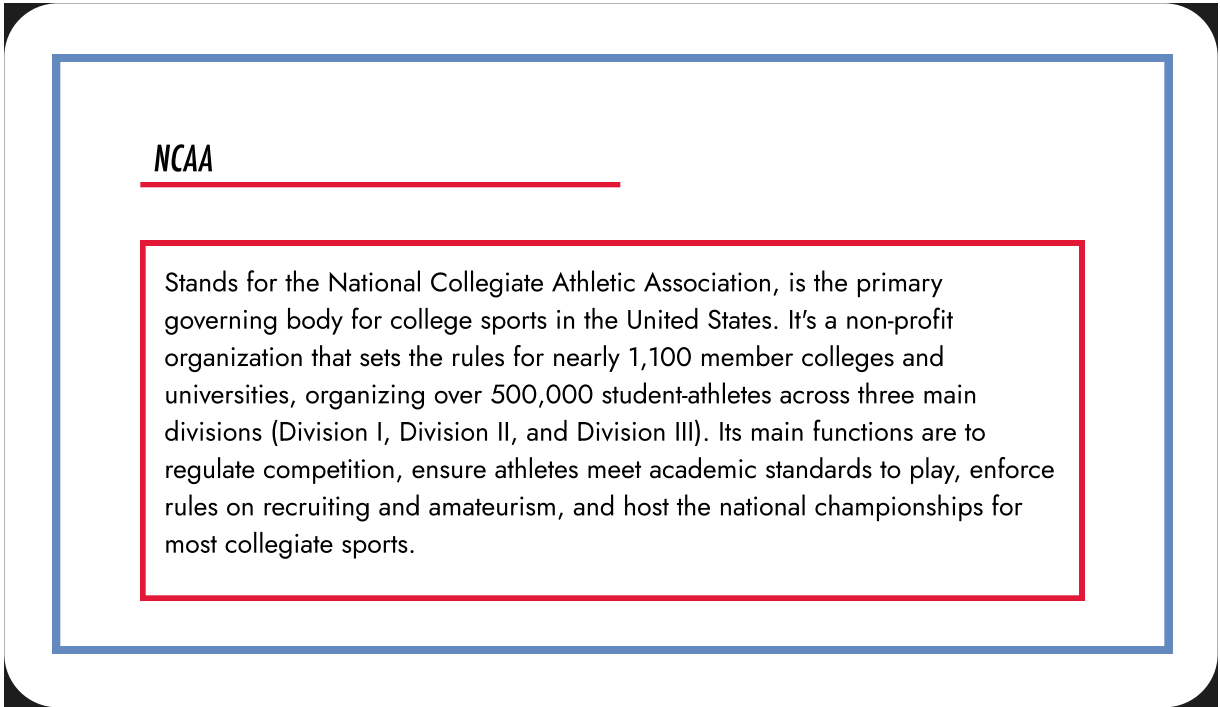


"Designers learn more about the concepts involved in their simulation or role-play than those who participate in it... 'encourages designers to first, view the system from above, and second, to work out the details.'"
(Douglas & Coburn, 2009)

THE CHANGES



Kit to Playbook

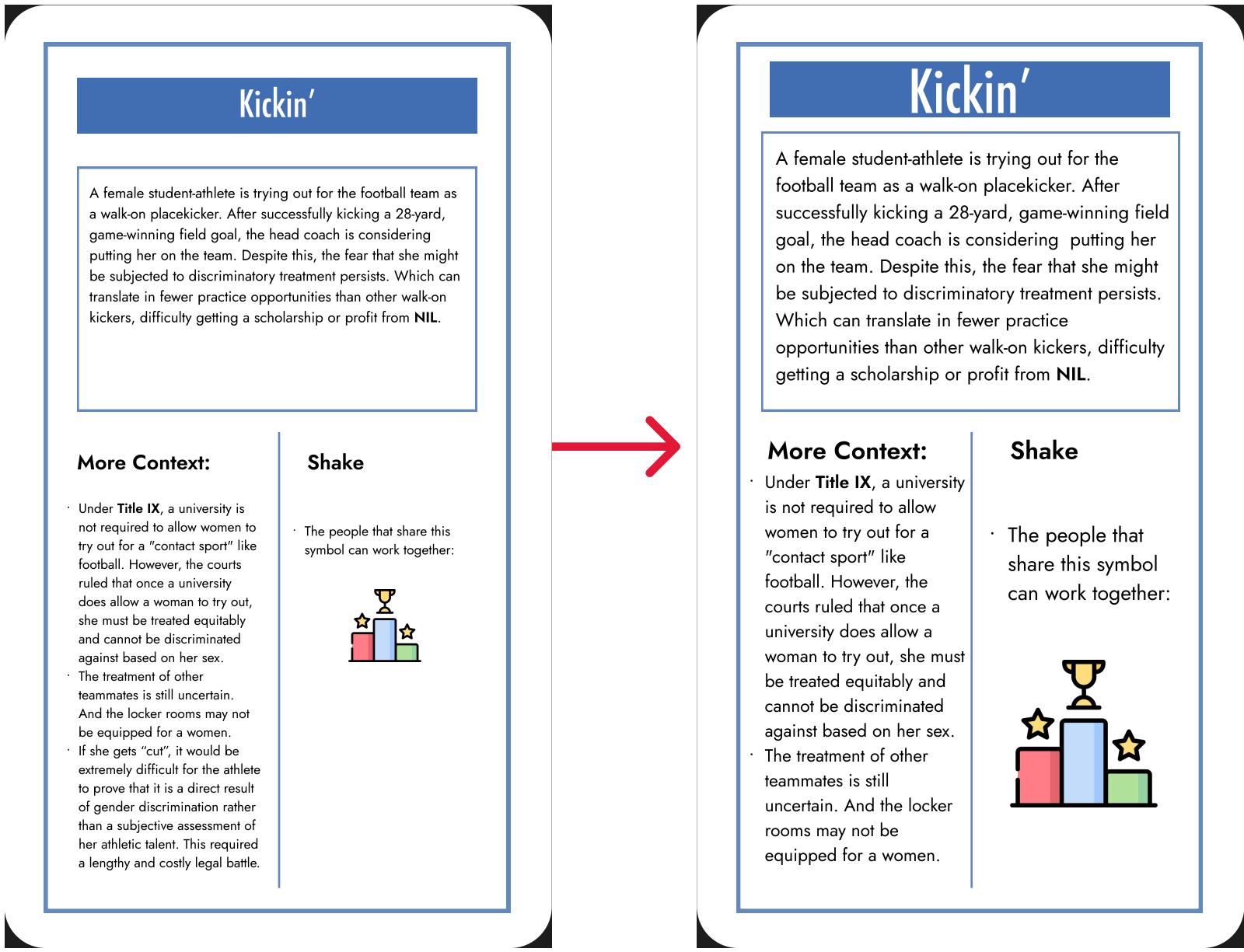


Instead of Kit cards, provide a
playbook with the definitions and
that will also allow them to take
notes on their own



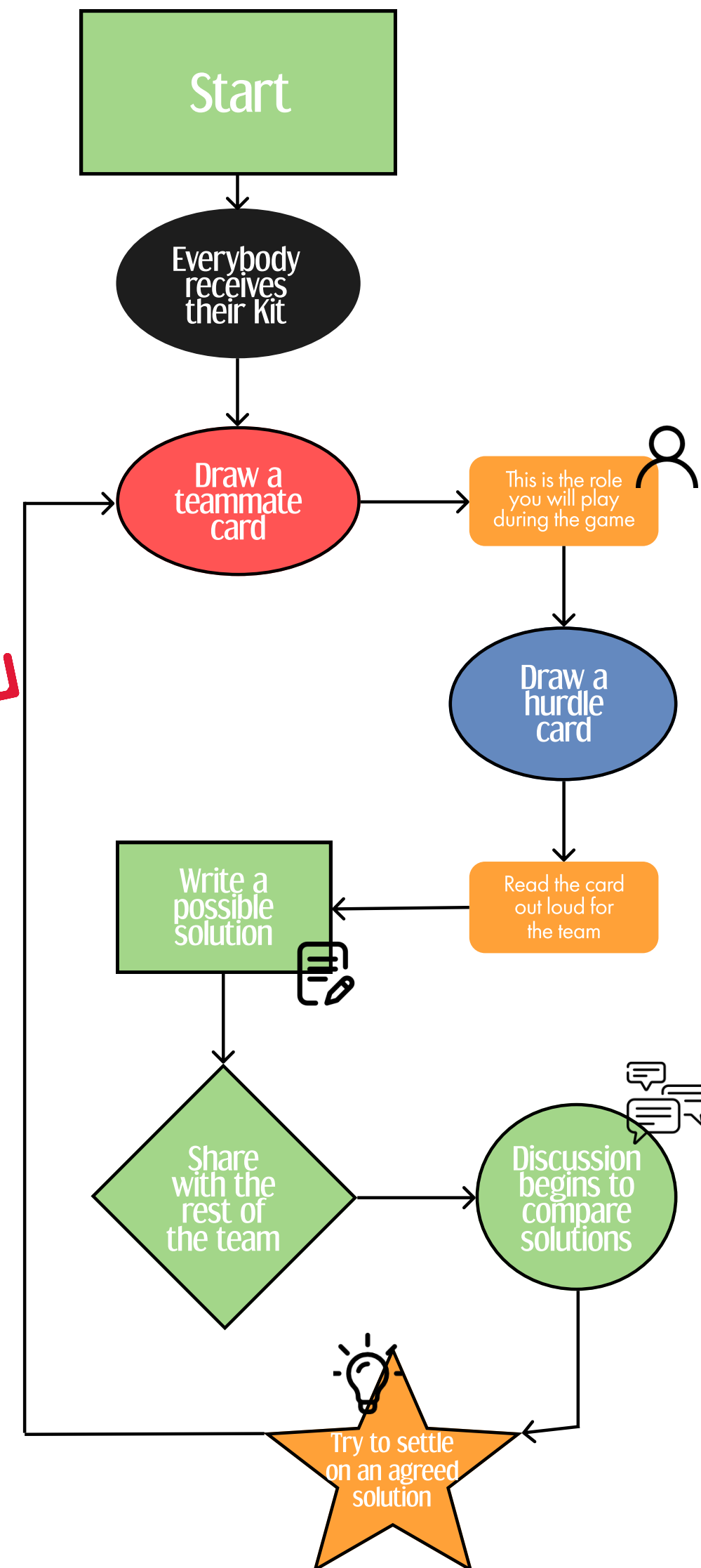
Design Adjustments

Change size font Increase the size of the font,
for better readability

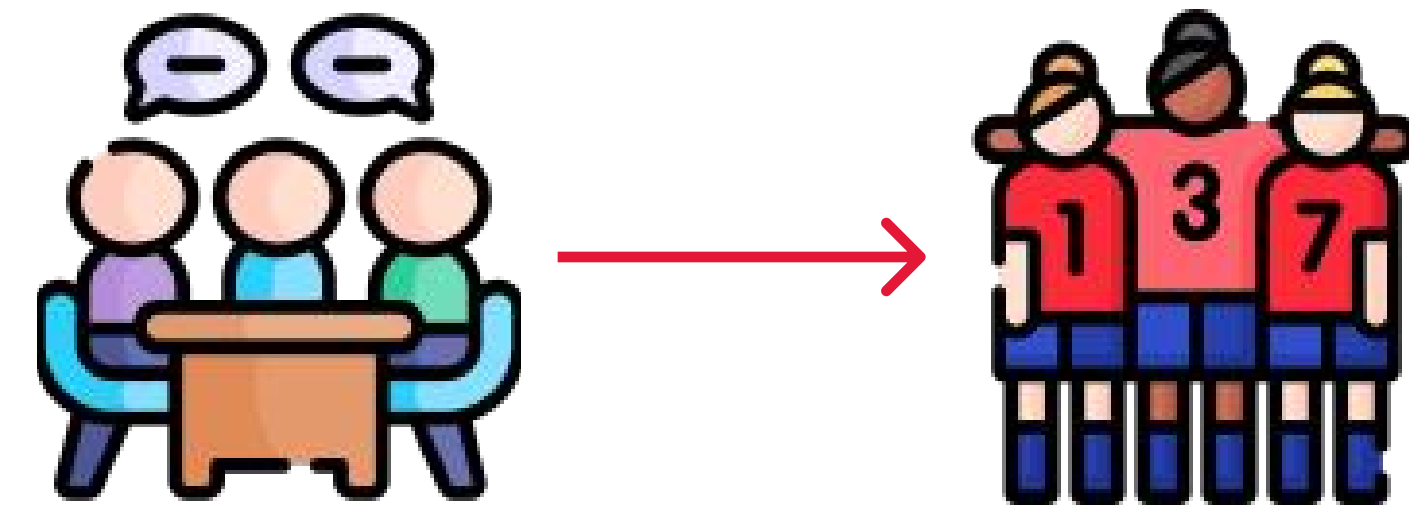


Application Possibilities

Making the participants change roles in each round



Giving participants more time to discuss and find a solutions that all agree on



Testing with a group of people slight more knowledgeable in the subject. Like sports management students


Analysis Improvements

Gather more quantitative data for the surveys

Surveys with scales, to be able to measure quantitatively the impact of the before and after of the game

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Netural	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3
	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3
	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3

Analyze how people engage with the cards



Head of Business Operations

"I'm looking at a millionaire budget where my revenue is fixed, but a court just handed me a new, non-negotiable \$25M expense line item. My job is no longer financial planning; it's financial triage."

Goals:

- The primary goal is to ensure the department is "fiscally solvent" and operates within its budget.
- Model, plan for, and ultimately fund the \$20M+ in annual **revenue-sharing** and settlement payments.
- Maximize all non-media revenue streams, including ticket sales, local sponsorships, concessions, and merchandising.
- Find cost savings across the department.

Motivations:

- Solvency
- Problem-Solving
- Data Driven
- Decision-making

Values:

- Responsibility
- Pragmatism
- Efficiency

Frustrations:

- Faces major financial risk from "employee-athletes."
- Coaches demand "must-have" items to stay competitive, which can include charter flights, bigger staff salaries, and luxury facility upgrades.
- Frustrated by rising costs like flights, buses, hotels, insurance premiums and equipment.
- Staff often don't see the "big picture" of the finances, which in turn makes them frustrated when their budget is frozen or cut.

Do they only focus on the title?

How effective is the description?

Do people put attention to the symbols?

How do people interact with values, do they relate them to their own?

APPENDIX

Hurdle cards

Fish out of Water


A transgender **student-athlete** has followed all existing **NCAA** rules for transgender athletes (one year of hormone suppression) before competing in the women's swim team. Upon competing in the women's category, she began having success in which created an intense, divisive debate, with some teammates and competitors arguing she retained an unfair physiological advantage from male puberty, while she and her supporters maintained she was simply following the rules to compete as her authentic self.

More Context:

- A significant portion of her team (though not all) and many competitors anonymously expressed that they felt the competition was unfair.
- The University and **NCAA** are facing immense political pressure and the threat of **Title IX** lawsuits from two sides: one arguing for the protection of the women's sports category and the other arguing for the civil rights and inclusion of a transgender athlete.
- The existing policies are not equipped to handle the specific nuance and public fallout of the case.

Shake

The people that share this symbol can work together:



The Color of the Wind


While competing in the **NCAA** Tournament, the women's basketball team, a diverse group including many women of color. They were out of town and while walking to dinner, the team was aggressively and repeatedly targeted by individuals in trucks. The assailants revved their engines, displayed Confederate flags, and yelled the N-word and other racial slurs directly at the players and staff. The harassment was so severe and intimidating that the team was left in shock and feared for their safety.

More Context:

- The event was deeply unsettling for the entire team, creating an environment of fear and distraction during the tournament.
- This was not a random or isolated encounter. The assailants returned and targeted the team a second time as they left the restaurant, indicating a deliberate act of racial intimidation.
- The only viable action was to move the entire team, to a different hotel mid-tournament, which was a significantly costly.
- The team could not remain in a location where they were being actively stalked and threatened.

Shake

If you have this symbol, you get to play the "bad guy" in your solution.



To Write, or Not to Write


A tutor, employee of the athletic department's academic services, completed academic work for 12 **student-athletes** across the football, baseball, and softball programs. This is not simply "extra help"; the tutor completed assignments, quizzes, exams, and in one instance, an entire online course for a student-athlete. The athletes submitted this surrogate work as their own to maintain their grades and athletic eligibility, a direct violation of the university's honor code and **NCAA** rules.

More Context:

- The tutor stated expressed they felt the intense pressure directed to the academic support staff to "do whatever it takes" to keep players on the field.
- This type of misconduct is incredibly difficult to detect. It relies on a secret arrangement. It only came to light because the tutor self-reported the violations to the university.
- The university had provided "extensive and comprehensive education on appropriate tutoring practices" to the tutor, which proved ineffective.
- Standard training and honor codes are often insufficient to stop individuals who are actively colluding.

Shake

If you have this symbol, you get to play the "bad guy" in your solution.



Storming the Field


Following a major upset victory fans flooded the playing surface in seconds. While attempting to exit the court, the team's star player, was involved in a collision with a rushing fan. The contact injured the athlete's knee (a sprain), and had to be helped off the floor by teammates and managers, unable to put weight on his leg.

More Context:

- The athletes on both teams are forced to navigate a chaotic, surging crowd. They are at high risk for physical (and often accidental) contact.
- Fines against universities for this type of situation exist. However, these are often viewed by as a "cost of doing business", and they do not stop the practice.
- The speed of the crowd surge was too fast for security to contain.
- Storming is often defended by fans as a spontaneous and cherished part of the college sports experience. This cultural attachment creates resistance to banning the practice.

Shake

The people that share this symbol can work together:



Kickin'


A female student-athlete is trying out for the football team as a walk-on placekicker. After successfully kicking a 28-yard, game-winning field goal, the head coach is considering putting her on the team. Despite this, the fear that she might be subjected to discriminatory treatment persists. Which can translate in fewer practice opportunities than other walk-on kickers, difficulty getting a scholarship or profit from **NIL**.

More Context:

- Under **Title IX**, a university is not required to allow women to try out for a "contact sport" like football. However, the courts ruled that once a university does allow a woman to try out, she must be treated equitably and cannot be discriminated against based on her sex.
- The treatment of other teammates is still uncertain. And the locker rooms may not be equipped for a women.
- If she gets "cut", it would be extremely difficult for the athlete to prove that it is a direct result of gender discrimination rather than a subjective assessment of her athletic talent. This required a lengthy and costly legal battle.

Shake

The people that share this symbol can work together:



Juicing it

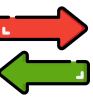
A standout track and field athlete tested positive for a banned anabolic steroid. The positive test occurred at an **NCAA**-sanctioned college meet. The athlete is highly successful, holding national championship title and having placed seventh at the **NCAA** finals the previous season.

More Context:

- The athlete is 100% responsible for any banned substance found in their system, regardless of whether they intended to cheat or not.
- There is no evidence to suggest this was a team-wide or university-supported issue.
- Raises questions about the pressures high-caliber athletes face to maintain or enhance their performance.
- The most common defense is claiming accidental ingestion from an unregulated dietary supplement. This is extremely difficult to prove and requires the athlete to have the specific supplement batch tested to confirm contamination

Shake

You get to change the values of your role with the person sitting to your right!



Bet on it


Three male student-athletes have conspired with outside bettors to "throw" games. An investigation, which began after a tip from another **student-athlete**, uncovered text messages on the players' phones. The messages showed the athletes planning to lose games by more than the betting spread. In one instance, a player instructed a teammate not to score any more points. The investigation confirmed the players manipulated their performance in seven different games to benefit themselves and the bettors.

More Context:

- This is not a passive violation (like betting on another team) but an active, deliberate corruption of competition.
- The athletes were not acting alone. They were in direct communication with known bettors, receiving payments in exchange for fixing the games.
- The investigation was built on a "digital paper trail." Text messages, phone imaging, and Facetime calls provided undeniable proof of the conspiracy.
- Without the teammate's report, it is highly unlikely the university or **NCAA** would have detected the manipulation, as it can be disguised as simply "having a bad game."

Shake

The people that share this symbol can work together:



Serious Time


Two football players were arrested for the aggravated rape of an unconscious 21-year-old female student (a non-athlete) in a dorm room. The players carried the unconscious woman into the room and sexually assaulted her. The entire incident was documented by the players themselves, who took numerous photos and videos with their cell phones. Other teammates were also implicated in attempting to help cover up the crime after the fact.

More Context:

- This was a violent crime committed by fellow students. This highlights the dangers of a toxic, entitled subculture that may exist within a team.
- The crime was not reported by the victim (who had no memory of the event). It was only discovered by "pure chance" when a campus police officer, reviewing surveillance footage for an unrelated dorm issue.
- The perpetrators' decision to film and photograph their crime provided prosecutors with graphic, irrefutable evidence.
- Another player pleaded guilty to being an accessory after the fact, admitting he encouraged his teammates to destroy evidence.

Shake

Choose one of your values or motivations that seems more fitting and using it along side empathy for your answer.



Kit cards

NIL

Name, Image, and Likeness, it's a policy that allows college athletes to get paid for their personal brand. Before 2021, athletes were not allowed to earn money from their sports status. Now, they can be paid for things like signing autographs, appearing in commercials, promoting a product on social media, or selling their own merchandise, all while remaining eligible to play their sport. It has essentially given student-athletes the right to profit from their own fame and identity.

NCAA Transfer Portal

A private online database that works like a market for college athletes. When a student-athlete decides they want to leave their current university, they formally ask their school to enter their name into this portal. Once their name is in the database, it becomes visible to coaches at every other school, who then can contact and recruit that athlete to join their team. This system was created to manage and bring transparency to the process of athletes moving from one school to another.

Student-Athlete

Is the official term, most famously used by the NCAA, for a college student who also participates in an organized, competitive sport for their school. This term was created to emphasize that the individual's primary role at the university is to be a student, with athletics being their secondary activity. It historically reinforced their "amateur" status, meaning they were in school for an education and were not considered professional employees of the university, though this distinction is now rapidly changing.

Revenue Sharing

Model where an organization's total income (revenue) is divided and distributed among a group of people or partners. In the context of collegiate athletics, this new model allows universities to directly pay student-athletes a share of the money the athletic department makes from sources like television media rights deals, ticket sales, and sponsorships. This is different from NIL, which comes from outside companies; revenue sharing payments come directly from the school's athletic budget.

GM

Stands for General Manager, an executive role most common in professional sports that is now emerging in high-level college athletics. In sports, the GM is not the coach but is the key decision-maker responsible for building the team's roster. Their job includes all personnel matters, such as managing the salary cap (in the pros), acquiring players through the draft, free agency, or the transfer portal, and is also responsible for hiring and firing the head coach.

Title IX

Federal civil rights law passed in 1972 that prohibits discrimination based on sex in any education program or activity that receives funding from the federal government. While it applies to all parts of education, it is best known for its massive impact on sports. In athletics, it is commonly understood to mean that schools must provide male and female athletes with equitable opportunities to play, proportional scholarship funding, and equal treatment in areas like coaching, facilities, travel, and equipment.

NCAA

Stands for the National Collegiate Athletic Association, is the primary governing body for college sports in the United States. It's a non-profit organization that sets the rules for nearly 1,100 member colleges and universities, organizing over 500,000 student-athletes across three main divisions (Division I, Division II, and Division III). Its main functions are to regulate competition, ensure athletes meet academic standards to play, enforce rules on recruiting and amateurism, and host the national championships for most collegiate sports.

Relevant Links

Articles quoted in this deck:

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- Douglas, K., & Coburn, C. (2009). Students designing role-plays: Building empathy in law students. <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Students-designing-role-plays%3A-building-empathy-in-Douglas-Coburn/f510a12076510baeffb8541f027923edbed623c6>
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- Renick, J. (n.d.). The Use and Misuse of College Athletics. JOURNAL OF HIGHER EDUCATION.
- Schrier, K., & Farber, M. (2021). A systematic literature review of ‘empathy’ and ‘games.’ Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds, 13(2), 195–214. https://doi.org/10.1386/jgvw_00036_1

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