

The Mesoamerican ball game was a complicated, dangerous game that symbolized the battle between life and death, and can be traced to many cultures as far back as 3,000 years ago. Not only was it symbolizing life and death, but it also brought death upon those who did not play it well. This game was commonly found all over Latin America including in the Olmec, Aztec, and Huastec societies. I will focus mainly on the Mayan version of the ball game.

The Olmecs are believed to be the inventors of the game. It is believed they invented it over 3,000 years ago. They were the first to use rubber, which is how the Olmecs got their name. In the language Nahuatl, olli is the word for rubber and Olmec is “the people who use rubber”¹ The Olmecs would use the rubber from the trees to create balls about the size of a hand. The rubber gave the balls the ability to bounce, however they were hard and solid enough to cause injuries. So we know what the balls used in the game look like, but what about the courts themselves?

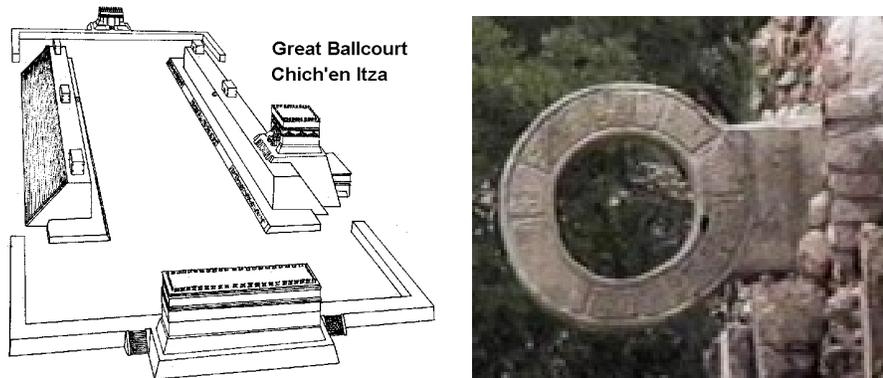
The Courts

Over 6,000 ball courts have been unearthed so far in Mexico. All the courts have pretty much the same structure. They usually have two parallel walls on the sides of the field. By 800 CE, stone circles or hoops had been added, attached to the side walls at the centre of the court.² The addition of the hoops may signify the changing of rules over time. The size of the courts could range from small; big enough for only one or two players per team could be on the court at a time, to very large; about the size of a football field. In the larger arenas, it appears that there were places for primitive “box seats.”

¹ Culture. 5 May 2004 <<http://www.pacaritambo.com/culture.html>>.

² Ibid

The following picture is a sample of what the courts looked like, and the hoops that were added.

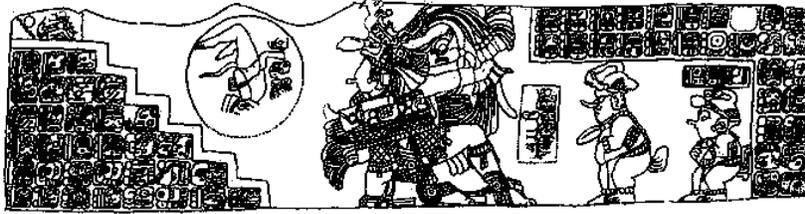


The layout of the ball court has been connected to various astronomical orientations. Whether the orientations are correct is not in question, for it is assured that the Maya rituals were reality oriented to the extent that they purposely tied in astronomical orientations to their lives. They clearly believed that the word of First Father came through the messages in the heavens. We can also tie the temple and pyramid sacrifice rituals to the asterisms at Perseus, Andromeda, the Great Square, Cepheus, and Sculptor. The ball court and the turtle of resurrection can be illustrated in the asterisms of Pisces and Cetus to correspond to the bottom of the ecliptic under the head of Cepheus and the body of Quetzalcoatl.³

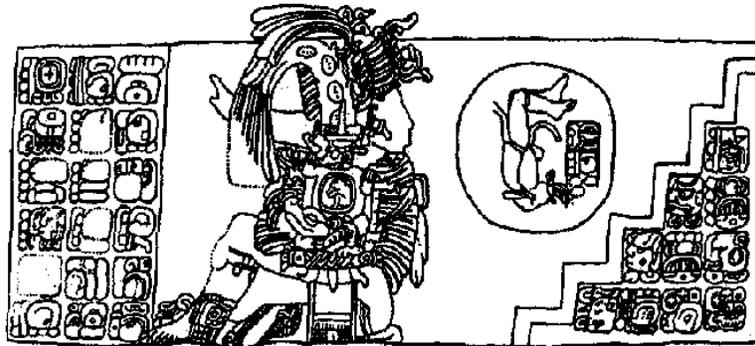


Shield-Jaguar plays down the chasm at the Six-Stair-Place
Panel 6, Central Panels of Yaxchilan HS 2

³ Meaning of the Ball Game in Mayan Mythology. 27 Sept. 1999. SU International. 4 May 2004
<<http://www.siloam.net/jenkins/5thsun4.html#top>>.



**Bird-Jaguar plays ball at the Three-Conquest-Ballcourt Stair
Panel 7, Central Panels of Yaxchilan HS 2**



**Six-Tun-Bird-Jaguar plays ball against a stairway with six steps.
Panel 8, Central Panels of Yaxchilan HS 2**

How it was Played

So, we know where the game was played, but how was it played? The game was a sort of combination of volleyball, basketball, and soccer. The ball was not allowed to touch the ground. It was bounced off the walls of the court and off the players themselves. The ball was allowed to bounce off the player's elbows, hips, knees, or head, but using their hands was an illegal move, just as in soccer. But unlike soccer, the goal in which you scored your points was very small. Points were scored by directing the ball through a stone circle hoop much like modern day basketball (pictured on page 2). It is also believed that points could be achieved by hitting particular posts and markers situated along the ball court. In most regions these markers were elaborately carved and decorated

with human or animal images. The most honored players, however, were those who managed to send the balls through the rings.⁴

As I said, it wasn't just the Maya and the Olmecs that played this dangerous and deadly (for the losers) game. It was played all throughout Mexico. The Aztecs, Zapotecs, and Toltecs all played the exact game, or a game very similar to it. They all also participated in the rituals that accompanied the game. One of the rituals that seemed to cross over to all the cultures was the wearing of regalia before the game started. Players came dressed in elaborate costumes. The Olmecs wore stone yokes with their regalia but wore wooden yokes around their waists during the games as protection. Equipment needs varied somewhat over time but most commonly headdresses or helmets protected the head, quilted cotton pads covered the elbows and knees and heavy belts or yokes, probably of leather or basketry, were worn around the waist. Aztec players wore heavy leather belts to protect themselves and the Zapotecs wore heavy helmets and gloves.⁵ These yokes, however, and special items known as Palmas, Hachas and Manoplas were also made in heavy stone and are clearly associated with the ancient ballgame.⁶ They have been recovered from burials of ballplayers and in the ruins of courts. They are also depicted on figurines, painted vessels, and stone carvings.

It is not certain whether this bulky stone equipment was actually worn during the play of the game or whether it was made for ceremonial purposes. It could have been that the clothing was worn as players paraded into the court or for completion rituals. The yokes, even though they may weigh as much as 50 lbs, fit easily, even comfortably,

⁴ Culture. 5 May 2004 <<http://www.pacaritambo.com/culture.html>>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Day, Jane S. Mesoamerican Ballgame. July 1992. Denver Museum of Natural History. 2 May 2004 <http://linux1.tlc.north.denver.k12.co.us/~gmoreno/gmoreno/Mesoamerican_Ballgame.html>.

around the hips of slender athletes and would have been extremely effective in returning the hard rubber ball.⁷ Manoplas, or hand stones, would have been useful in hitting the ball or protecting a participants hand as he fell to the floor of the court in play. Palmas and hachas, however, seem to have little purpose in the game. The palmas, shown worn at the front of the yoke, are too fragile to have survived the rigorous play. The hachas, which dangle from the belt or yoke, at first glance also seem useless adornments. Many of them, however, are in the shape of a human or skeletal head and may relate to an ancient tradition when the game was associated with a headhunting cult. Members of such a cult might have hung from their belts the trophy heads taken in battle. Hachas may reflect this symbolism and its ancient relationship with the ballgame.⁸

The Aztecs called their variation of the game Ullamalitzli. Their ball court was called Tlachtli. In Aztec society, only the nobility could play the game. This didn't mean that every class couldn't watch the game. In fact, every person, no matter what class, could watch and bet on the game. Betting was common during the games. Gold, slaves, and even the freedom of the betters could be placed as a bet. Gambling was an essential part to the game. "They ... gambled their homes, their fields, their corn granaries, their maguey plants. They sold their children in order to bet and even staked themselves and became slaves to be sacrificed later if they were not ransomed."⁹ In the Aztec game, players would not score points, but instead try to get the ball through the stone rings. The first team to do so was the victorious team. The captain of the losing

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Duran, Fray D. Book of the Gods and Rites and the Ancient calendar. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1977. 315-318.

team was sacrificed to the gods. The Maya played a game that was pretty much exactly the same to the Aztec version.

The Mayan version of the game was very similar. The game may have been a reenactment of the Mayan myth of the Hero Twins. In the myth, the Hero Twins had to battle the gods of death from the underworld by playing a ball game. According to the myth, the Twins win and they rise into the heavens to be the sun and the moon. The ball is believed to represent the moon while the sun and the court represent the earth. The ball was kept in the air, just as the sun and the moon were always in the sky. Many warriors and kings played the game fiercely. Like the other Mesoamerican cultures that played the game, the leader of the losing team was sacrificed to the gods. They Mayan thought that the gods had purposely chosen the losing team to lose and for its leader to be sacrificed. The winning team was also thought to have been chosen by the gods.

According to translators Fernando Horcasitas and Doris Heyden of the book *Book of the Gods and Rites and the Ancient Calendar* by Fray Diego Duran, “The man who sent the ball through the stone ring was surrounded by all. They honored him, sang songs of praise to him, and joined him in dancing. He was given a very special award of feathers or mantles and breechcloths, something very highly prized. But what he most prized was the honor involved: that was his great wealth. For he was honored as a man who had vanquished many and had won a battle.”¹⁰ The player or players sacrificed would be decapitated using an obsidian blade. The sharpness of the obsidian blade ensured a clean cut. In the Mayan culture, the battle between the teams signified the battle of life versus death during the third creation. The court's floor represented the earth surface. It was a crucial part to their culture for its religious symbolism.

¹⁰ Ibid.

The Spread of the Game

The Olmecs, the originators of the game, spread the game along trade routes across central Mexico. As mentioned earlier, thousands of Mesoamerican ball courts have been unearthed all throughout Mexico and even the Southwestern United States. Two hundred oval shaped ball courts have been reported in an area ranging from the Mexican border to just south of Flagstaff, Arizona. At least two forms of this ancient sport still exist and are played in Mexico today, but this will be discussed later.

With the arrival of Cortes in 1519, the game was recorded by Spanish soldiers and priests in documents that survive today and give us written descriptions of the Pre-Columbian game. However, during the Spanish colonial period in Mexico the ballgame, and what the Catholic church viewed as its pagan rituals, were prohibited, the splendid courts were torn down and the game almost forgotten.

Lacrosse, what many think to be an offshoot of the Mesoamerican ball game, was the game that the native population of North America played. This major team sport, played originally with a leather ball and one or two throwing racquets. The teams for the lacrosse game would have anywhere from seven to seven hundred people playing against each other. Like the Mesoamerican ball game, the playing of the game was associated with rituals, religion, and high stakes gambling.

For over 500 years a Mesoamerican derived ballgame was also played in the Hohokam region of Arizona. It probably reached the American southwest from west Mexico. In the southwest, from the present border with Mexico, north to Flagstaff, 206 ball courts have been identified at 166 sites. The courts are oval with slightly concave

floors, not the “I” shape of Mesoamerican courts; however, with their smoothed surfaces and parallel walls they are functionally suitable for playing a form of the Mesoamerican ballgame. Rubber balls have also been recovered at Arizona sites, further confirming the connection between the Hohokam culture and Pre-Hispanic Mexican civilizations to the south. Most likely the idea for the game itself was carried, along trade routes established for the exchange of turquoise, copper, shell, macaw feathers, cotton and other valuable items. Small clay figurines of ballplayers, painted pottery and petroglyphs along with the ball courts, confirm the presence of the Pre-Columbian game in the southwestern region of the United States.¹¹



The Game Today

In the states of Sinoloa and Oaxaca the solid rubber balls are still made and teams avidly compete against each other in village streets and city plazas. In northwestern Mexico, Sinoloa teams play a game called Ulama that is closely related to the game played by the Aztecs at the time of the Spanish conquest. In the southern highland valley

¹¹ Day, Jane S. Mesoamerican Ballgame. July 1992. Denver Museum of Natural History. 2 May 2004 <http://linux1.tlc.north.denver.k12.co.us/~gmoreno/gmoreno/Mesoamerican_Ballgame.html>.

of Oaxaca another game also related to the pre-Hispanic sport is played with a solid rubber ball that is hit with a heavily padded leather glove studded with nail heads.¹²

The Ulama game that is still played today was derived from the Aztec version of the game. Its name, Ulama, is even derived from the Pre-Columbian Aztec name of 500 years ago, the Aztec name being ullamalitzli, and solid rubber balls are still carefully made to be used by the competing teams.¹³ The prestige and nobility of the game has disappeared over time. With the passing years the elaborate, colorful costumes have disappeared over time. The stone courts and of course the religious rituals have also disappeared. When the game is played, it is played on an open field with marks designating the field dimensions. There are two versions of the Ulama game played today, the hip Ulama and the arm Ulama. Arm and knee protectors are worn during the game. In hip Ulama, players wear a triangular deerskin tied around the waist and a heavy leather belt which protects the lower abdomen from the impact of the ball. Usually there are three players on arm Ulama teams and five on hip Ulama teams. The players line up in a straight line on their own half of the court, between the center dividing line and the baseline. At each of these lines an umpire is stationed. The ball may be hit either high or low with hip or forearm depending on the game, but must not be touched with any other part of the body, including hands and feet. The umpire or judge at the center line rolls or throws the ball into the court to begin play.¹⁴ The first team to score eight points is the winner. The scoring system is complicated and your points can go up and down. This makes for lengthy games. Another version of the games is also played today, this one in the Miztec region of Mexico.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

The Miztec ball game is played in the Miztec region of Mexico. It is played on a court about 300 feet long by 30 feet wide, marked out on a field with lines. On both ends of the court there are territories marked and are called the serving and return areas. It is here that a flat stone is placed in which the ball will bounce off of at the serve. A solid rubber ball is used in play and is hit with a glove or gauntlet which may weigh up to fourteen pounds. The specially made leather glove is padded on the palm with layers of hide and reinforced on the outer surface with round headed rivets to protect the part of the hand most directly in contact with the heavy rubber ball.¹⁵ The teams are made up of five players. Once a ball is served, the players must keep returning before it hits the ground or bounces only once. Points are scored when one team manages to get the ball out of reach of the opposition, so that it bounces out of bounds on the side or end zones and cannot be returned.

The Mesoamerican ball game was an important game to every culture that played it. It symbolized life and death. It was the game of gods, for it was the gods who chose who won or lost. One thing was for sure, you did not want to be the person, or team, who lost. There were no consolation prizes in this game. Your reward was being killed with an obsidian blade. (It's a shame that we couldn't do that to the Yankees when they lost the World Series).

¹⁵ Ibid.