

Sport of the Aztec and Maya Indians

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Games and sports played a significant role in the cultures of the Aztec and Maya Indians with religious, social, and political ceremonies integral parts of most sports events. Among the Indians of Central America and Mexico, the primary sport which emerged early in their history was entitled the "ball game." "Volador" or high pole, "patolli" (similar to dice), stilts, hunting, jai alai, and the "ceremonial day game" were secondary in importance to the "ball game," yet still very prominent in one or both of the cultures.

Every town of importance supported at least one ball court, and prominent cities such as Tenochtitlan (Mexico City) had several. The number and size of the courts were directly proportional to the size of the population. Thirty courts were found in Yucatan, the region inhabited by the Mayan King, Topiltzian, who is said to have introduced the court.

Heretofore, the earliest known formal court, found in Copan, Honduras, is of the Early Classic period—dating around 200-300 A.D. Because this court is far from primitive, it is assumed that the first courts pre-dated this one by several hundred years. The form of the court resembles the letter "I," yet the overall dimensions varied from court to court, ranging from one to two hundred feet long and twenty to fifty feet wide. Along the main corridor were smooth sloping stone walls of roughly fifteen to thirty feet, embellished with carved decorations, e.g., parrot heads; along the base were benches for substitutes. A vertical stone ring, diameter commonly two feet, was attached midway and toward the top of the wall. The court acoustics created echos from wall to wall of sounds of the ball near the rings. Human skulls of victims, and game losers, were stacked and displayed on the court surroundings. Landscaped with palms and other trees, the courts were a magnificent sight, while functionally providing a powerful defensive against the Spanish and alien Indian tribes.

The game ball was made of solid rubber, with a diameter ranging from three to twelve inches, and weighing about five pounds. Sculptures on temple walls represent the ball to look like a large, dimpled golf ball. The dwarf plant "guayule," found in Vera Cruz and Northern Mexico, produced the rubber for the ball. The Spanish conquerors were particularly intrigued by this rubber ball since Spanish balls were traditionally made of leather and hair.

Serious injury could be inflicted on a player with the hard ball which was mainly struck with the elbows, knees or hips, but was not to be hit with the hands, feet or calves. Players were known to throw themselves on the ground to hit the ball properly. The full impact of the ball was in this case absorbed by the body. Participants wore equipment for protection, including chin pieces and half masks for cheeks, hard leather gloves, quilted cotton elbow pads, knee pads, belts or yokes made of leather or basketry for the waist a protruding palmate stone, and a leather apron.

Early Spanish writers, who witnessed the ball games as played by the Aztecs, were amazed at the speed of play. Judging by their description, the game was a combination of basketball, soccer, volleyball, and as thrilling as ice hockey or jai alai. Professionals, nobles, and the general public played, with the teams normally ranging from two to eleven players. Public mobs did play the game, though "en masse" with each individual playing to win.

Description of the rules and method of play are vague. Emphasis was placed on moving the ball quickly and keeping it in the air with the elbows, knees and hips. Points were scored if the opponents were unable to return the ball causing it to fall to the ground, by driving the

ball from one end of the “I” shaped court across the center line and into the opposite “end zone.” If the ball was hit through the stone ring the game was automatically won.

Great skill was required to keep the ball in play, with players often hitting the ball off the side wall. Requiring even greater skill was the feat of hitting the ball through the ring. Players guarded the rings in order to block ring attempts. If one failed at an attempt, faults were awarded; but if one was successful, the scoring team won regardless of how many previous points had been scored. While the captain of the winning team was deemed a hero, the captain of the losing team was often sacrificed to the gods to insure fertility of the land and abundance of harvest.

Games were attended by spectators, including nobility, with betting of gold, feathers, homes, and slaves typical. As the crowds spectated they enjoyed tortillas, and maintained a semblance of spectators of an English cricket match-watching in a “reserved sacred silence.”

Religious, political, and social customs played an integral role in the game. Tribal quarrels, or personal disputes were often settled by the outcome of a ball game. Religious ceremonies accompanied every game, with courts having a sacred temple, and special priestly ceremonies conducted before, and midway through the game.

Aspects of the ancient ball game of the Aztecs and Mayas did influence the modern ball games of Europe and America. The adoption of the rubber ball into European sport altered existing rules of their games, and the seemingly original Indian notion of a cooperative team effort, and highly competitive team play very well could have affected the development of the team concept in Europe.



The Texas Jester Center hosted the 1980 NASSH Convention.