The Rubber Ball Game
A Universal Mesoamerican Sport

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An extremely athletic sport was played by the Aztecs, the Maya, and other peoples of Prehispanic Mesoamerica, a vast area of complex societies, in what is now Mexico and Central America (see Fig. 2). In the game, a heavy solid rubber ball about 6 inches in diameter was volleyed back and forth in a specially constructed court bounded by steeply rising side walls. It is traditionally believed that the ball be struck only with that part of the body from the waist to the knees. In some representations, the players can be seen holding handled stones and wearing large yoke-like, zoo, or palm-shaped objects tied at the waist. These have been found in archaeological sites dated from A.D. 900 to 1200. The rubber ball game was mentioned by the Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés, who described how the people of the city of Tenochtitlan played it. The game was also popular in other Mesoamerican cultures, such as the Maya and the Incas. The ball game was a symbol of power and was played by both men and women. The game was played in large open areas, often with spectators watching from the sidelines. The players struck the ball with their hips and knees, and the objective was to keep the ball in play for as long as possible. The game was considered to be a test of strength and agility, and the players were often rewarded with food and other goods. The game was believed to have religious and cultural significance, and it was often played during important ceremonies and festivals. The game was eventually banned by the Spanish colonial authorities, who viewed it as a form of idol worship. Despite this, the game continued to be played in secret for many years, and it is believed that the game played a significant role in the cultural heritage of Mesoamerica. The game was also played in other parts of the world, such as in Europe and Asia, and it continues to be played today in various forms.
The Ball Game

Durán's manuscript contains a drawing of the ball game (Fig. 4), probably done under his orders by a native artist. The architecture is rendered in Pre-Columbian style, although the human figures are drawn with the shading, perspective, and features of European tradition. The drawing shows two players wearing thin and abbreviated thigh paddles (of leather) and arm wrappings, holding a ball of about the proper 6-inch diameter. The court, shown in plan in native style, is I-shaped, with enclosed end zones and with rings set in the side walls on the center line. Rings and enclosed end zones are standard features of most courts throughout Mesoamerica after A.D. 1200, but are lacking in all of the Tikal and in most of the Classic Maya ball courts. Over the players' heads are drawn a string of large beads and a bundle of feathers. Since another illustration from Durán's manuscript depicts similar objects over the heads of ball game players, these probably represent the stakes wagered in the play.

Scoring apparently involved a double system, one based on a complex system of points as in tennis and the other occurring whenever a ball passed through a ring. In Aztec play, the penetration of one of the rings by a ball was an exceedingly rare event. One Spanish observer wrote that "A man, throwing it by hand at close range, could not put it in once in one hundred tries, nor in two hundred" (Motolinía, quoted in Sarn 1900:66). When a player succeeded in getting the ball through a ring he thereby won the game no matter what the point score had been. He and his teammates were at that moment free to snatch up as many of the opponents' and spectators' cloaks as they could manage.

Points, on the other hand, according to Durán, were scored: 1) when the ball was struck by any part of the body other than the buttocks and upper leg; 2) when it was allowed to land in or fly out over one of the "square corners" or end zones; and 3) when it died in the alley without being passed back across the center line into enemy territory. Thus, since the earlier Classic Maya courts lacked the rings, and even in Aztec times the penetration of a ring overrode the point scoring, it seems clear that the original game involved point scoring alone.

Durán mentions a painted center line on the alley floor between the rings, but does not tell of any division lines between the alley and the two end zones. On many Classic Maya courts, such as the one at Copán (Fig. 5), three flat stone markers are set into the floor on the longitudinal axis, at the center point, and at the two ends of the alley. These clearly divide the playing floor into the same four zones as are implied by Durán's description: the opposing halves of the long alley where the ball can hit the floor but not be allowed to die, and the two end zones where it cannot even hit the floor. The presence of these three marker stones in many Classic Maya courts implies that the basic rules of point scoring were the same in those times as in the Aztec game. The fact that none exist in Tikal courts does not mean that the game was carried out similarly to the way they fought in battle...

Ball players on a carved ball court marker from Piedras Negras, Guatemala. (Sutterthwaite 1944: Fig. 22.)

A ball game played on the East Plaza Court at Tikal, as depicted in a graffiti inside Structure 5D-43, just south of the court. (Telt and Kampera 1985: Fig. 4b.)

Further Archaeological Findings

Although the recent advances in decipherment have yielded no such stories of the ball playing inclinations of Maya rulers, the archaeology of Tikal has revealed two interesting connections between the sport and at least one Tikal sovereign. The Great Plaza and the adjacent East Plaza were restructured several times from the 1st to the 6th centuries A.D., with a series of hard, smooth and still preserved plaster coatings. We discovered, after analyzing the excavation data that the East Plaza ball court (Fig. 5) and its southern shrine building (Fig. 9) were contemporary with a complete resurfacing of the East Plaza, the Great Plaza, and the North Terrace. This enormous project also included construction of the first version of the causeway leading north out of the East Plaza. Also built at this time was Structure 5D-32, a large temple erected to cover the tomb chamber which we number Burial 195. George Guilemin of the University Museum staff found within that tomb, unusually preserved in silt, the in situ traces of a three-ribbed U-shaped wooden hoop or yoke (Fig. 10) such as was worn by ball players portrayed in Maya sculpture, painted pottery, and clay figurines (Figs. 6, 12). The ends of the hoop were painted black, then red, then stuccoed and painted green. When the balls were within the stuccoed ends were filled with plaster, the three-ribbed ends were extracted whole (Fig. 11). The thin wood of the hoop would have been flexible enough to be wrapped and tied about the waist or around a waistband. There is little doubt that this is ball game equipment. Near the hoop was found a darkened area of organic substance, about 6 inches (16 cm.) in diameter, that Guilemin thought to be the remains of a rubber ball.

Using texts found on several of the Burial 195 vessels, we were able to identify the tomb occupant as 'Animal Skn', 22nd ruler of Tikal. On the basis of other inscriptions, we can place the time of his burial—and thus the construction of the ball court—during the mid-7th century. The late 6th and early 7th centuries do not seem to have been good ones for Tikal. No carved monuments nor large construction projects can be tied to that 100-year period, and almost every one of
the earlier monuments had been smashed, broken in two, or partially erased. I had speculated earlier (Joshi 1977) that Tikal’s collapse occurred during the 8th century reign of Animal Skoll’s grandson. It would appear, however, from the history of the construction projects at the death of Animal Skoll, that Tikal’s fortunes had been reversed and an architectural renaissance was already well on its way by the mid-7th century.

The construction of the East Plaza ball court near to that in the Great Plaza meant that two courts stood close to each other in the center of the site. This new court, large and elaborately decorated, was in the center of the East Plaza, where the principle causesways of the site would converge and where a later quadrangle of low buildings would constitute what we suspect to be the Tikal marketplace.

The ball courts were generally placed in or next to the marketplaces of the towns and cities (Stuart 1950:31). This is a fitting place for a game in which so much was staked, for as Duran remarks: “The nobility, the lords, captains, brave and important men...bet jewels, slaves, precious stones, fine mantles, the trappings of war, and women’s finery (171.315). Clearly a great deal of market commodity was changing hands during the play in both cities, much of which probably came out of or flowed back into the nearby market stalls.

Two ball courts occupied the Great Compound at the Tikal capital of Tenechtitlan, according to Bernardino de Sahagun (Stuart 1950:52.65), although neither one has yet been located in excavation. One, located in the center of the plaza, was called the “Teotlacho,” or Divine Ball Court. It was the scene, in the 15th twenty-day month of each year, of a sacrificial re-enactment of the crucial mythological event in the formation of the Tikal culture, the sacrifice of an original Teotlacho of Coatlanauinqui, the moon, by her brother Huhtlacholotil, the sun and patron deity of the Aztecs. All we know about the other court, the “T zalelacho” or Mirror Ball Court, is that it was situated “between the bases of the temples” and was the scene of sacrifices “under the sign of Omacatl, which probably refers to the 365 days and Two Reed on which each 52-year cycle of Aztec history began.

At Tikal, the mid-7th century East Plaza court was built directly over an Early Classic (A.D. 300–600) pair of twin pyramids at approximately the same time that the first of seven or eight pyramid pairs was constructed. These complexes, called Twin Pyramid Groups, are for the most part dated securely through hieroglyphic inscriptions to the ends of katun, the important 20-year periods of Maya history writing. Since a new pyramid group seems to have been constructed for every katun through the 9th century, they probably housed the ceremonies marking each successive katun. On the other hand, the East Plaza pyramid set, which the ball court buried, had apparently been used for more than just one or two katus, for there is evidence of its staiways having been refurbished at least once during its existence. Therefore, the spot chosen for the new ball court had probably been the stage of former new cycle ceremonies for many scores of years.

Cultural Implications

It seems to me that the diachrony between the two central ball courts in both Tenechtitlan and Tikal is similar. One court is connected to community and tribe, in the Tikal case through ritual re-enactment of a tribal creation myth, and in Tikal through greater antiquity and proximity to the ancient tombs and monuments of the ancestral rulers.

The other court, in both cases, is associated with ceremonies of the oncoming cycles of time, the Aztec 52-year period and the Maya katun, rather than with the past. At Tikal, the construction of the new court was at the beginning of an expansion, outward-looking period in which grandeur predominated, as expressed most noticeably by the five soaring great temples and the long straight causeways, but also by the successively larger Twin Pyramid Groups and by the many great stone palace buildings erected in all parts of the site.

I would suggest that this contrast between the two ball courts in Tikal and Tenechtitlan points out a basic similarity between the dynamic situations of the two communities in spite of their differences in size (an estimated 50,000 for Tikal and 200,000 for the Aztec capital). Both 8th century Tikal and 16th century Tenechtitlan seemed to be in the process of transformation from a seat of a restricted city-state within a constellation of independent and equal neighboring states to a metropolis, capital of a confederation of cities which recognized a paramount lord.

It is becoming clear from the inscriptions of the other Maya centers that Tikal never became as successful as Tenechtitlan in dominating its region politically or militarily, but it seems also clear from the grand architecture of Late Classic Tikal that an attempt was made to have a metropolitan “first among equals” image was made at Tikal and not at any other Late Classic Maya center. Most of the other Classic Maya sites, such as Copan, Quirigua, and Palenque, remained relatively small and are visually and architecturally unified by a single centrally placed ball court. The same unified aspect is presented by the location of the 9th century Uxmal court and later by the great oversized 10th century ballcourt at Chichen Itza, where apparently some degree of domination over a large Mayan region was finally accomplished.
Lacrosse

Political Organization in North America as Reflected in Athletic Competition

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Introduction

The increasing popularity of lacrosse on college playing fields and in other schools and clubs throughout North America reflects the renewed interest in a vigorous sport which is native to this continent. A review of the origins of this fast-moving competition offers us some insight into the lives of the people who introduced the sport to the European immigrants. Just as interesting is what this information reveals about those native peoples who did not play lacrosse, or any other sport of this kind.

Origins and Early Descriptions

Lacrosse or bagataway (from Ojibwa paguandacwin), a complex team sport first noted by Europeans in 1602, may have evolved with the formation of the league of the Iroquois (Five Nations) in the late 1560s. The Five Nations people (Seneca, Cayuga, Onondaga, Onondaga, and Mohawk tribes) have from that time until fairly recently been the best known players of this game. Originally, lacrosse was played with a stick with a bent or hooked end (see Fig. 2a, right), which the Europeans thought resembled a shepherd’s crook or a bishop’s crozier. The latter analogy led to the sport being named “la crosse” by the French.

Although the sport may have been over 100 years old before Nicholas Perrot wrote his first important description in 1602 (see Perrot 1911), we have no direct evidence of its existence prior to that date. Perrot provided several descriptions of the game during the period from 1602 to 1609, and Wollf (1977:16) notes that an Abbe Fercald and later a Monsieur La Honton (1700) provided complementary descriptions of these contests (see Converse 1989:145).

The Games: Then and Now

The stick or crosse used to play bagataway, according to the earliest descriptions, was generally of heavy hickory, with tight or taut webbing. The rawhide laces of this network may have helped to form or maintain the bend in the stick. This tension in the webbing (which was greater than that of the modern crosse) meant that a player could hit the ball, as in tennis, or use the crosse to stop the ball before picking it up again with the webbed end. The wooden ball formerly used in play was noted as being shaped more like a turkey’s egg than round.

Playing field size was agreed upon by the competing teams in these early contests. The first accounts mention sizes ranging from 500 to 600 paces up to 1.5 miles (2.5 km.) in length. The two teams were equal in size, but team size could vary with the number of players available. Teams as large as 1,000 were reported, and if accurate must reflect the size of the adult male population of an entire Five Nations village, although some early accounts suggest that women often were included on these teams.

In these early competitions the number of goals needed to win a