

The Brutal History of the Mesoamerican Ball Game

By Atlas Obscura, adapted by Newsela staff

The Olmecs, who lived in areas between southeastern Mexico and Nicaragua in Central America, started the ball game around 1500 B.C. The Maya, who became powerful in southern Mexico and parts of Guatemala around A.D. 700, tweaked it. Finally the Aztecs, who lived in central Mexico around A.D. 1400, nailed it. The ball game was played in Mesoamerica. It was the area from Mexico to Central America, before it was discovered by Columbus and other European explorers. The game was played with a solid, 10-pound rubber ball. Usually, there were two teams. There were 1 to 4 people on each team. Stone ball courts were added later and have been found from Arizona to Nicaragua.

The exact rules of the game aren't known. But many believe the game was played more or less like today's volleyball, without a net, or like racquetball when racquets or bats were used. Players wore helmets, pads and thick protective belts around their midsections. The ball was kept in play by hitting it off the hips of the players and not letting the ball hit the ground often.

Ball games were for the upper class



The great ball court at Chichén-Itzá in Mexico. Photo: Daryl Mitchell/Flickr.

The Mesoamerican ball game began in an area where the *Castilla elastica* tree grew. The milky-white latex would be "tapped" by cutting a thin line in the bark. The liquid would drip out into a cup and be mixed with juice from a white morning glory flower to create a rubbery latex. It was shaped into a ball and got very hard. Many balls have been discovered in graves and near altars in temples. Ball courts have been found near the homes of Olmec chiefs. This suggests that only the wealthy, upper-class Olmecs could afford to put on a game. The giant stone heads found in the region also show chiefs wearing the ball-playing helmet.



A goal in the ball court at Chichén Itzá, Mexico. Photo: Kare Thor Olsen/Wikimedia.

When the game was played by the Maya, they added their own special religious twist. They played it to make the gods happy. According to their religious book, Popol Vuh, humans and the lords of the underworld battled each other in the game in front of the entrance to the underworld. The Maya added a stone ring for extra point opportunities. But, putting the ball through the hoop was a very rare event. The Maya used the game after they defeated their enemy in a war. The captives of wars were forced to play games that were rigged for them to lose. The losers were sacrificed to the gods. The losers often had their heads chopped off. The Maya also used the game instead of going to war. The game was used to settle disputes over territory and even to predict the future.

Losers faced death

The Aztec ball games pictured on many vases and sculptures also showed the death of the losing team. There are even some drawings of ball players playing with the heads of the losers in place of a ball. But there is no evidence that this really happened. The Spanish observed the game and left written records of the contests. They reported terrible injuries to those who played it. There were deep swollen bruises, broken bones and even death when a player was hit in the head or by an unprotected hit by the heavy ball.



Decapitated ball player in the Anthropology Museum of Xalapa, Mexico. Photo: Maurice Marcellin/Flickr.

There are many of these fine ball courts one can visit today. The largest and best-preserved ball court is at Chichen Itza in Mexico. It was built around A.D. 800. In fact, Maya ball courts can be explored at just about every archaeological site. You can't do much playing at these historic sites, but a slightly less violent version of the game, called Ulama, still survives and is played in Mexico today.