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## The Mesoamerican ballgame

*A matter of life and death*

The term 'ballgame' refers to a wide variety of ball sports widely played in ancient Mesoamerica. These sports were a key element in ancient Mesoamerican religious ritual and political life. Rubber balls have been found at the early Olmec site of El Manatí, dating to around 1600 BC (Ortíz & Rodríguez, 1999), and are the earliest known example of the use of rubber in Mesoamerica. Rubber was also used to make figurines and bands for hafting axe heads, and in liquid form it was used for pain relief and for medicinal purposes. It was obtained by tapping the indigenous *Castilla elastica* tree. Latex from this source dries into a brittle substance that is of little use, but Mesoamerican people improved its elastic properties by adding an extract of the vine *Ipomoea alba* to produce a solid white mass. Modern researchers have found that a ball formed from such material exhibits typical rubbery behaviour, can bounce to a height of 2 m (6 ft. 6 in.). The technique alters the mechanical properties of latex and predates the modern vulcanising process by 3,500 years (Hosler, et al., 1999).

At least three variants of the ballgame continue to be played to this day, although the rules of the original pre-Columbian games are not known. The pivotal role of the ballgame in ancient Mesoamerican life is reflected in the large number of known ball courts – almost 1,300 – located at around 1,000 sites. The earliest-known ball court is that at Paso de la Amada, Chiapas, dating to 1600 BC (Blomster, 2012).



Much early evidence of the game comes from ceramic figurines and other images of ballplayers. The earliest such figurines date to 1700 BC and were recovered from a tomb at El Opeño, Michoacan. An arranged scene portrays five male ballplayers and three female spectators. Three of the ballplayers are equipped with bats. All five are wearing shin-pads and short helmets, and some wear mitts over their hands. A small yoke-shaped basalt piece was also found in the tomb. It was probably worn on the hand to protect it or for hitting the ball, and is the earliest example of ballgame equipment found so far. However, the ballplayers lack the elaborate costumes that characterise later depictions. It is likely that the ballgame had yet to assume its full significance (Blomster, 2012). Notably, the ball court at Paso de la Amada predates the emergence of a hierarchical society there by about a century (Lesure, 1997). Perhaps at this stage, the ballgame was still primarily a recreational activity.

Soon however, it would become linked to conflict, competition, hereditary leadership, and emerging political inequality. Ballgame costume is present on several pieces of monumental sculpture from the Olmec site of San Lorenzo. Monument 34 depicts a half-kneeling male figure wearing shorts, with a thick protective belt and loincloth. The monument has been interpreted as an Olmec ruler in his role as a ballplayer. At one of the San Lorenzo satellite towns, a monument features a similarly-clad ballplayer straddling a bound captive probably destined for sacrifice. Figurines from San Lorenzo depict ballplayers equipped with headdresses and helmets that mask the whole of the face, except for the eyes. They are wearing wide, thick padded belts and loincloths, and round pendants interpreted as mirrors. Similar imagery is seen with ballplayer figurines recovered at Etlatongo in Oaxaca and Cantón Corralito in Chiapas (Blomster, 2012). The latter site has been interpreted as an Olmec colony due to the similarity of its ceramic assemblage to that of San Lorenzo (Cheetham, 2007).

Figurines from the central Mexican sites of Tlatilco and Tlapacoya show distinct differences to Olmec figurines. The differences may reflect regional variations in either the game itself or the attendant rituals. Some examples from Tlapacoya wear a protective yoke supported by vertical or crossed suspenders on the front torso, probably related to the thick padded belts from San Lorenzo and Cantón Corralito. Some central Mexican figurines also wear tall, elaborate headdresses and ear flaps, again distinct from their Olmec counterparts. These elaborate costumes were probably worn during ceremonies taking place before or after the game, rather than during the game itself (Blomster, 2012).

It is generally accepted that the ballgame was closely associated with elite power and represented institutionalised ritual combat, possibly serving as an alternative to

actual warfare. The ballgame might also have served a role in local dispute resolution. Some versions of the game were associated with human sacrifice and others were of great cosmological significance. The Maya text Popol Vuh describes the ballgame as a contest between mortals and sinister underworld deities. The ball of the ball in the court symbolised the movements of the sun and moon, in turn representing the regeneration of life and the maintenance of cosmic order; the ball court itself represented a portal to the underworld (Blomster, 2012). The former Liverpool F.C. manager Bill Shankly allegedly described football as much more important than life and death: the same, apparently, was true of the Mesoamerican ball game.

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