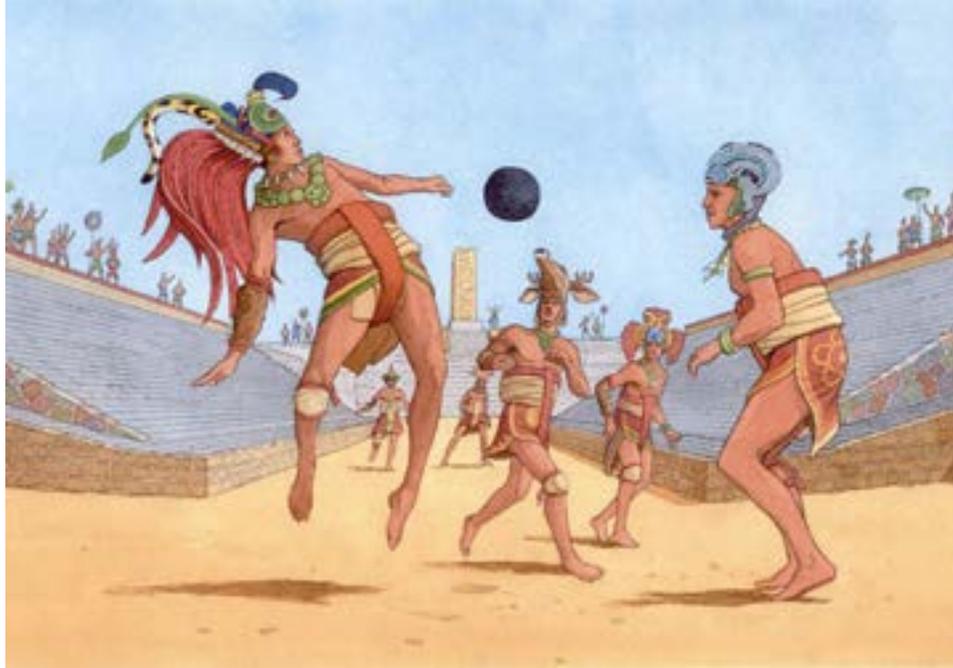


# The Maya Ball Game

By Vanderbilt Center for Latin American Studies



Native peoples are those who were the first people to live in a particular place. The Maya are native peoples who live in parts of Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. Belize, Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador are countries located in the northern part of Central America. The Maya were the only people to live in these places until the Spanish conquerors arrived in the 1520s.

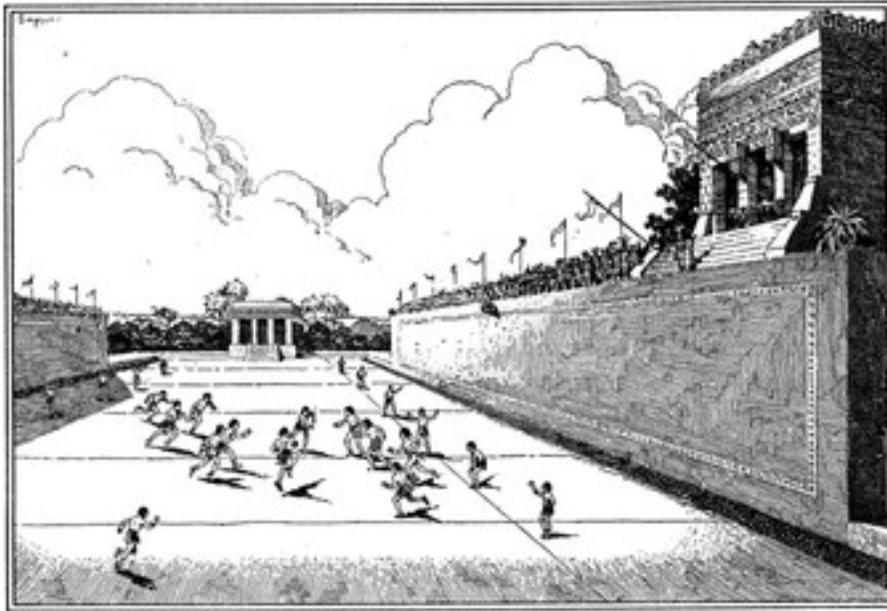
The Maya played a game that was a distant ancestor to soccer, basketball and volleyball. Although we are not sure about the exact rules of the game, here are some possible basic rules:

- The object of the game is to get the most points
- You hit the ball through a hanging stone ring to score
- Hands can only touch the ball if it is “out of bounds”.
- The ball is “out” if it touches the ground
- There are two teams playing
- Both teams wear padding

The Ball Game, called *pok-a-tok*, was sacred to the Maya. It was an extension of their religion, and involved a great deal of ceremony. The game may have been a reenactment of the Maya 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.

The ball is believed to represent the moon and the sun and the court represents 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. Casual games were dedicated to the lesser gods and were friendly affairs. However, periodically there were large games dedicated to the major gods. In these games, the losers would be killed, and would have their heads displayed in front of the court.



The game would be played in an “I” shaped court, approximately 25 feet wide, by 75 feet long with a flat court and walls that sloped outward. The ball was six inches in diameter and made of solid rubber. Teams consisted of 2 to 11 players who would try to hit/bounce the ball through a small hoop that was about twenty-seven feet off of the ground.

The players would have to keep the ball in motion using parts of their bodies like hips, thighs and forearms, but the use of hands and feet was not allowed. The players would wear heavy arm and hip armor while playing, to protect themselves. It was extremely difficult to get the ball through the hoop. Because of this, when a player was successful, the spectators would be expected to give him their clothing and jewelry. As a result, once the ball went through the hoop the spectators would leave quickly to avoid giving the player a reward.