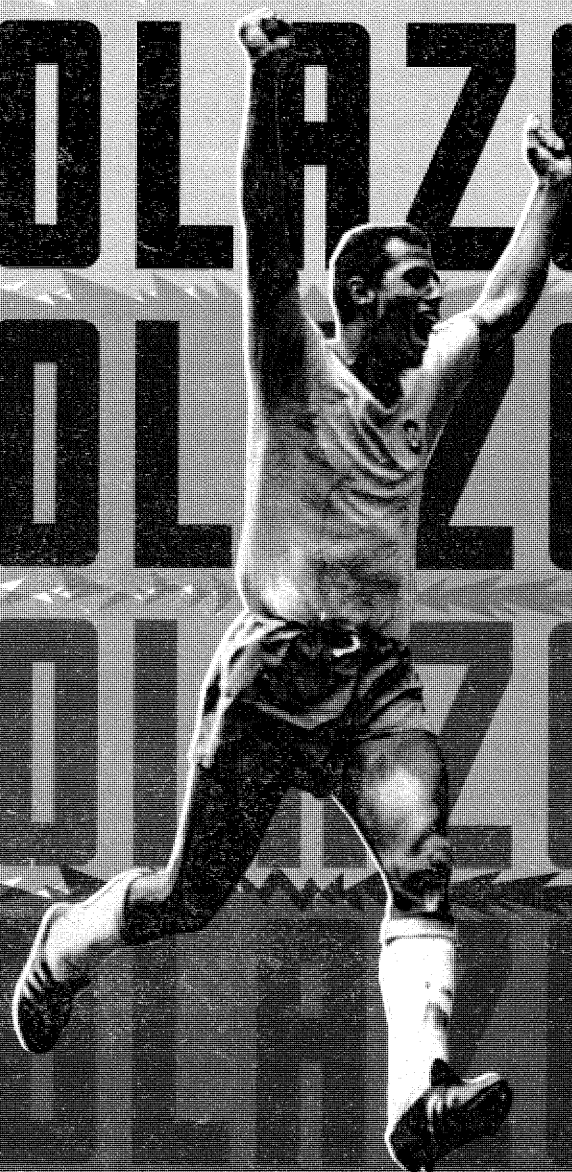


ANDREAS CAMPOMAR

GOLAZO!

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The Beautiful Game from the Aztecs to the World Cup:
The Complete History of How Soccer Shaped Latin America

In Latin America the border between soccer and politics is vague. There is a long list of governments that have fallen or been overthrown after the defeat of the national team.

—Luis Suárez

Tell me how you play and I will tell you who you are.

—Eduardo Galeano

Football is popular because stupidity is popular.

—Jorge Luis Borges

Whoever invented football should be worshipped as a god.

—Hugo Sánchez

Poverty is good for nothing, except for football.

—Jorge Valdano

That Latin America is unique, because there exists no other Latin America except this one, does not mean that it is one, in the sense that there is unity. Disunion does not exclude identity. Neither does diversity.

—Mario Sambarino

A few miles away from the Estadio Azteca, buried under modern-day Mexico City, lay Tenochtitlán—a city described by Hernán Cortés as the most beautiful in the world—whose memory stands witness to an Aztec (Mexica) ancestry from which not only Mexicans but also all Latin Americans should claim cultural heritage. In his Nobel lecture, delivered four years after Maradona had led the Argentines to glory, the Mexican poet Octavio Paz sought to explain what most Latin Americans instinctively felt but, for the most part, could not express: “Hispanic eccentricity is reproduced and multiplied in America, especially in those countries such as Mexico and Peru, where ancient and splendid civilizations had existed . . . That history is still alive: it is a present rather than a past. The temples and gods of pre-Columbian Mexico are a pile of ruins, but the spirit that breathed life into that world has not disappeared; it speaks to us in the hermetic language of myth, legend, forms of social coexistence, popular art, customs.”¹

Among Tenochtitlán’s ruins, which rest under the Metropolitan Cathedral of Mexico City, can be found a ball court dating to the 1480s. More than a hundred years later, Fray Bernardino de Sahagún would compile his *General History of the Things of New Spain*, a primer of Amerindian practices for clerics coming to the New World. The seventy-eight buildings documented in the book include a description of two ball courts: “The thirty-second edifice was called *Tezcatlachco*; this was a ballcourt, in it they killed some captives as devotion when the sign *omacatl* [an Aztec deity associated with specific calendar dates or signs] reigned.”²

Notwithstanding their use as theaters for human sacrifice—which played a significant role in Mesoamerican religion often through live heart extraction, mutilation and decapitation—it was on these ball courts (*tlachtli*) that the most renowned variation of the ball game took place. *Ullamalixtli*, as witnessed by the Spanish conquistadors in the sixteenth century, was played throughout the Aztec empire. In his memoirs, *Primeros Memoriales*, the Franciscan de Sahagún sought to capture the essence of this peculiar pursuit:

*Then the playing of the ball game began. And the spectators sat above the ball court on both sides; all the noblemen, or lords, or seasoned warriors sat divided into two sections. And on each side above the ball court, each on his own side, sat the contenders to whom the ball game pertained. And to each side of the court was attached a [circular stone] called tlachtemalacatl, which had a hole [in the center]. And he who put [the ball] through it, won the game . . . And it was said that the ball game was like war . . .*³

At the game’s peak, over 16,000 rubber balls were exported each year from the lowland provinces to Tenochtitlán as royal tribute. (The *Castilloa elastica*—from which latex sap was gleaned, mixed with the extract of the morning glory plant and fashioned into rubber balls—grew wild from the lowlands of southern Mexico down through to present-day Colombia.) Nevertheless, the game that the conquistadors encountered had not been limited to the Aztecs. From what is now southern Arizona down through Mexico and into Central America, an area of a million square miles, the ball game had been played for over two millennia until the fall of the Aztec empire in 1521. (Over 1,500 ball courts have been unearthed.) Since its inception in 1600 BCE by the Olmecs (known as the “rubber people”)—to which time rubber balls from El Manatí, on the Gulf of Mexico, have been dated—the game gradually evolved. Although Pan-Mesoamerican in spirit, the ball game took on diverse meanings and traditions according to region.

By the advent of the Spanish conquest, *ullamalixtli* had become a largely secular and highly popular pastime. Not a true sport in the modern sense, the ball game was a combination of competing functions: part ritual and part recreation, on which large wagers would be placed. Yet popularity—the game was played relentlessly—did not herald conformity. The Mesoamerican ball court varied in size, between one hundred and two hundred feet in length, twenty to thirty feet in width, and eight and eleven feet in height, though all

courts retained the shape of a Roman *I*. Ball games were played as singles, doubles, and with up to eleven players. Teams did not have to be evenly matched: there were instances of matches where two players were drawn against three. The most important players, on either team, stood in the center of the court as if primed for battle.

There seem to have been variations in scoring points, the ability to send the ball through a ring, secured to the side of the central court, which won the game instantly:

The Spectators seeing the Ball so drove through the Hole, which they look'd upon as miraculous, tho' it was only an accident, were wont to affirm, that the Man who did it was certainly a Thief, or an Adulterer, or would dye very soon, since he so fortunate, and this Success was talk'd of for a long time, till the like hapning [sic] again it was forgot.⁴

This necessitated both skill and good fortune: the knee, buttock and hip were all used to propel the ball, while employing other parts of the body would incur a foul. Belts and padding, fashioned from leather and wood, were used to protect the players' hips and thighs. Moreover, the rings were at times either the same size or fractionally smaller than the ball, which made scoring even more problematic. According to Fray Toribio de Benavente Motolinía, "A man, throwing it by hand from close range could not put it in once in one hundred tries, nor in two hundred."⁵

Rubber balls were usually the size of a skull, and both quick and heavy. As one Spanish chronicler observed: "Jumping and bouncing are its qualities, upward and downward, to and fro. It can exhaust the pursuer running after it before he can catch up with it."⁶ Or as the seventeenth-century Spanish historian Antonio de Herrera y Tordesillas succinctly pronounced: "The balls made thereof tho' hard and heavy to the hand, did bound and fly as well as our footballs."⁷

Given that it was lauded for its belligerence, it is unsurprising that the ball game often resulted in death and injury. Too often balls

rebounded with such speed that players were unexpectedly caught in the face and stomach. The fortunate had to have their bruises cut open in order to have the blood clots removed. The less fortunate were struck dead instantly by the sheer force of impact. There was an art to playing the game well that provoked admiration in one of the great Spanish chroniclers, Fray Diego Durán:

There were those who played it with such skill and cunning that in one hour the ball did not stop bouncing from one end to the other, without a miss, [the players] using only their buttocks [and knees], never touching it with the hand, foot, calf, or arm. Both teams were so alert in keeping the ball bouncing that it was amazing.⁸

Durán applauded the panache with which Indian males—highborn or low—played the game, also remarking on "the skill and lightness with which some play it, how much more are to be praised those who with such cunning, trickery, and nimbleness play it with their backsides or knees!"⁹ In the manuscript of the *Book of the Gods and Rites*, the Dominican friar dedicated a chapter to the ball game in what must be one of the finest accounts of Aztec culture. Admonished during his lifetime for seeking to understand Aztec society and practice, and subsequently forgotten for over three hundred years, Durán chronicled a civilization that was on the verge of vanishing.

While applauding the noblemen for playing the game for "recreation and sport," he balked at those who played it "for profit and as a vice."¹⁰ (Though the Spanish were not immune to the pleasures of gambling themselves.) The Aztec nobility, who took to the courts with great skill, often employed the services of proto-professional players, who were made to play each other on feast days. Gambling on ball games was rife, and with it came the obligatory superstitions. The ball, an object of reverence, was subjected to incantations and the creation of spells, so as to increase the chances for success on the court. Priests, "black as those who come from Hell,"¹¹ would

consecrate ball courts by throwing the ball across the court four times; while games were played at midnight, especially on days of auspicious omen. In many cases there was a personal cost:

*These wretches played for stakes of little value or worth, and since the pauper loses quickly what he has, they were forced to gamble their homes, their fields, their corn granaries, their maguery plants. They sold their children in order to bet and even staked themselves and became slaves, to be sacrificed later if they were not ransomed.*¹²

Though for the nobility the stakes could be even higher. The tyrannous ruler of Azcapotzalco, Maxtla, who eventually met his death on a ball court, was reputed to have lost the Tepanec empire in a ball game. While Axayacatl, monarch of Tenochtitlán, gambled his annual income, together with duty revenue, against Xochimilco. When Xihuitlemoc, ruler of Xochimilco, won the match, he was duly assassinated by his quondam ally. This was no game: this was war by proxy.

Cortés returned from the New World to the court of Charles V with a team of *ullamaliztli* (ball game) players who were drawn by the German painter Christoph Weiditz juggling various objects with their feet. (Although there is no evidence of the ball game having been played at court, López de Gómara disdainfully records that the team only included "eight tumblers, several very white Indian men and women, and dwarfs and monsters."¹³) Nevertheless, it was not long before the game that had charmed the very earliest conquistadors and that Motecuhzoma Xocoyotl had introduced to Hernán Cortés with such delight, was prohibited "because of the Mischief that often hapned [*sic*] at it."¹⁴ Motecuhzoma should have listened to the portents long before the arrival of the Spanish. Nezahualpili, ruler of Texoco, had construed a comet, which had been observed in the east, as an ill omen: namely, the destruction of the empire. Motecuhzoma, however, failed to believe Nezahualpili's prophecy, so a ball game was held to test its validity. Motecuhzoma duly lost the game, and history took its course.

Tragically, by 1585, all 556 ball courts in the region had been destroyed, a process accelerated by the Iberians' proselytizing impulse. The Franciscan Motolinía, who believed Mesoamerican religion to be in effect devil worship perpetrated by Satan himself, saw the ancient ball game as a form of witchcraft. He recorded how the ball courts were destroyed because of their idolatrous nature. *Tchatali* had all but been eradicated.

By the twentieth century, all that was left were the shadows. In *Itinerary*, his intellectual memoir, Paz recalls Chichén Itzá, where in his youth he spent a week among the ruins:

*One morning as I was walking through the Ball Game Court in whose perfect symmetry the universe seemed to rest between two parallel walls, under a diaphanous and impenetrable sky, a space where silence converses with the wind, a game field where constellations battle, altar of terrible sacrifices: on one of the reliefs that grace the sacred rectangle one can see a defeated player, on his knees, his head rolling on the ground like a sun decapitated from the heavens, while from his severed throat sprout seven jets of blood, seven rays of light, seven serpents . . .*¹⁵

The significance of the Grand Ball Court was not lost on the young Paz, who marveled at the explicitness of the Mayan bas-reliefs. It was here, in what had been one of the largest Mayan cities, which boasted thirteen ball courts, that the Spaniards would have "encountered history as well as geography."¹⁶ And while death may not have been a prerequisite of the Aztec ball game, the Mayan variant (Pok-Ta-Pok) was steeped in chthonic mythology where death and the game had become inextricable. Even the court itself, architecturally configured so that it rested lower than the surrounding pyramids, may have represented a portal to Xibalba (Place of Fear), the terrifying underworld where the Lords of Death would be encountered.

The myth-historical narrative of the Quiché Mayan, contained in *Popol Vuh* (*Book of the People*), is arguably the most important Amerindian text that survives. Transcribed and translated into Spanish by Fray Francisco Ximénez at the beginning of the eighteenth century, the book recounts the creation myth of the Quiché and the gods' various attempts to create a conscious human being. Yet what makes the text even more remarkable is the importance of the ball game and its significance in Mayan culture.

Divided into five parts, opening with the beguiling "This is the beginning of the Ancient World" and ending with the tragic finality of "This is enough about the being of Quiché, given that there is no longer a place to see it,"¹⁷ the central myth in part three of the book records the various ball games played against the Lords of Death in Xibalba.

When the terrestrial ball games of Hun Hunahpu and Vucub Hunahpu, the sons of the divine grandparents (the oldest gods), disturb the Lords of Death, four messengers in the form of grotesque owls are dispatched from Xibalba. The message from these dark lords, who among their number include Demon of Pus, Demon of Jaundice, Scab Stripper, Blood Gatherer and Demon of Filth, is a firm challenge to a ball game in Xibalba. The brothers take up the offer and make their way across rivers of blood and pus and past a torrent of scorpions into the Underworld. Nevertheless, it is after a night in the Dark House, where they are given two cigars and a torch and told not to exhaust them, that Hun Hunahpu and Vucub Hunahpu are sacrificed for failing the trial. They are buried in the ball court, though the decapitated head of Hun Hunahpu is put in the fork of a calabash tree, which then duly bears fruit. When Blood Moon, the daughter of a Lord of Death, passes the tree, the severed head spits into her hand. Discovering she has fallen pregnant, Blood Moon is expelled from Xibalba through a hole in the ground. On earth she gives birth to the hero twin boys, Hunahpu and Xbalanque.

Once the hero twins discover a ball-game kit hidden in their house, they become accomplished players. Their games, like those of

their father, upset the Lords of Death, who summon them in seven days. The message, however, is sent to their grandmother, who dispatches a louse to bid the boys into the Underworld. Unlike their fathers before them, the hero twins manage to outwit the Lords of Death, both on and off the ball court. Deception through illusion, however, allows the Lords of Death to be defeated, when Xbalanque decapitates Hunahpu and brings him back to life. Two Lords of Death, who are overly impressed by this trick, ask to be mock-sacrificed, only to die at the hands of the hero twins.

There have been numerous interpretations of the significance of the ball game and its centrality to Mayan culture. The ball, with its mysterious flight through the air, is thought to have reflected the movement of the sun and the solar system. While the transition from the terrestrial to the underworld is certainly the battle between light and darkness, day and night, good and evil as well as life and death. The ball court, on the other hand, represented both the removal and renewal of life: a place where the shedding of blood would bring rebirth and fertility. The very nature of the game meant that fortunes could be reversed at any point. While decapitation (of figures such as Hun Hunahpu) came to symbolize the maize god and the sacrifice of defeated players the crop harvest. Skull racks (*tzompantli*), such as those at Chichén Itzá, were placed adjacent to the ball courts: a timely reminder of those that had been sacrificed. The pitting of two opposing forces in a game of both skill and chance, where sacrifice was the endgame, acted as the harbinger of seasonal change.

While the Mesoamerican ball game may have been the most highly developed in the Americas, it was not the only ball game played by the Amerindians. As far south as Patagonia, *tchoekah* proved a popular pastime, played as a forerunner of hockey. A variety of rubber-ball games were played in what is now Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia and the western heartland of Brazil. According to Eduardo Galeano, even "the Indians of the Bolivian Amazon say they have been kicking a hefty rubber ball between two posts since

time immemorial,"¹⁸ though this is more likely a tongue-in-cheek view of Latin American hegemony in all things football.

From the Otomac in the Venezuelan *llanos* (plains), who mostly used their shoulders to play, to the Amniapã of Brazil, who liked to wager arrows, the ball game flourished wherever there was rubber. The Apinayé, who live between the Amazonian rain forest and Brazil's savannah, played the rubber-ball game as part of an initiation ceremony into adulthood. The game's mythology tells the story of a madman who uses a leg bone to attack villagers at night. The villagers manage to capture the man and cut off his head, only for it to roll away and return in the light to exact its revenge. The head is tricked into a hole, whereupon it is covered with earth. In time a rubber tree grows from the burial site, and the sap is used to create the first rubber balls.

Even as late as the first decades of the twentieth century, explorers found that Amazonian Indians were playing with balls "not unlike football."¹⁹ "In some parts of the Putumayo the author has seen the Indians at their games with these balls of caucho, and their cleverness with them was really remarkable as they passed the ball from one to the other, impelling it by means of their knees, hands and heads."²⁰

Despite the conquistadors' efforts to drive it into extinction, variants of the ancient Aztec game survive to this day. (In Sinaloa, Mexico, a variation is still played as *ulama*; while in Michoacán, a nocturnal game is played, whereby the ball, symbolizing the sun, is set alight and moved around with sticks.) Nevertheless, in the writings of Durán and his fellow Iberian chroniclers, the evidence of this ancient ritual is still alive. The Dominican friar may have been unable to persuade a group of Aztec elders to play a game for him, but he remained captivated by "the games, tricks, and skills which these people performed with their feet, hands, and bodies."²¹ Durán seemed to foretell what would be made clear for the world to see in the twentieth century: "I venture to say that there is not and never has been another nation in the world which has practiced greater and cleverer skills than these."²²