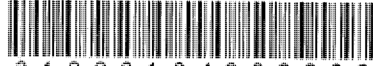
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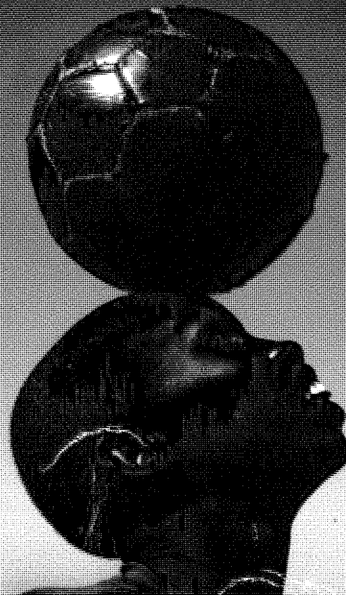
…ced, hit (or whiffed) a ball will mightily … came from, and why, from our earliest … of the very fun that makes us human."
—…D, author of *The Old Ball Game*

The Ball

Discovering the Object of the Game

JOHN FOX



P.S.
INSIGHTS, INTERVIEWS & MORE...

Rubber balls and the Mesoamerican game that put them into play got their debut with the Olmec, one of the earliest civilizations in the Americas that emerged along the tropical coast of the Gulf of Mexico. The Olmec, whose name translates as "Rubber People," not only invented the process for making rubber and devised a game to capitalize on its wondrous properties. They also built cities with monumental, psychedelically colorful pyramids; carved mysterious colossal 15-ton heads depicting semidivine rulers; developed the earliest writing system in the New World; and may have been the first to invent a sophisticated calendar that introduced the concept of zero to the world of mathematics. No slackers, this bunch.

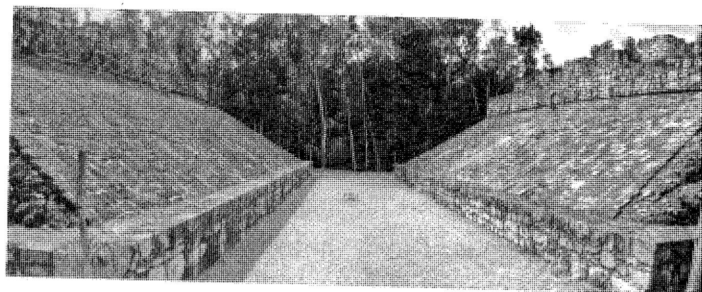
Discoveries by archaeologists give a surprisingly complete

picture of the ancient ball game as it was played by the Olmec as far back as 1500 BC. At El Manatí, a waterlogged bog on the coast of Veracruz, archaeologists dredged from the ancient muck a dozen rubber balls that had been ceremonially deposited there alongside statues of deities and other ritual offerings.

Found nearby was a belt made of exotic greenstone that a ballplayer may have worn around his waist and used to strike the ball. Farther west, in Michoacán, a group of eight clay figurines found in a tomb show a scene of five men playing ball while three women sit and lie around as if watching the game. And to the south, on the coast of Chiapas, the remains of the Americas' first ball game stadium were uncovered at a place called Paso de la Amada.

To date, more than 1,500 ancient ball courts like the one in Chiapas have been found in archaeological sites from Flagstaff, Arizona, in the north to central Honduras in the south, though only a fraction have been studied or excavated. Hundreds more lie buried beneath city streets and sprawling highways or await discovery in remote jungles.

With a unique architectural form that persists across centuries, the ancient Mesoamerican ball court is as easily identified and as iconic as our modern baseball diamonds. Although the size and features of these courts vary widely according to their age and location, their basic form stayed remarkably consistent: two long, low parallel buildings bordering a narrow playing alley with sloped interior walls extending from the top of the structures to the playing field. The alley, where the action took place, was usually paved



The ancient Maya ball court at Cobá, Mexico.

with stone and covered with limestone plaster. End zones closed in by temples or other buildings were typically wider than the playing alley, giving many courts a distinctive I shape if viewed from high above.

As with sports stadiums today, almost every midsized town or city in Mesoamerica could boast at least one ball court, usually located right downtown alongside the most sacred temples and elaborate royal palaces. One early archaeologist, bushwhacking his way through Mexico's densest jungles in the 1920s to record ancient ruins, stumbled upon so many of these courts that he described them as an "epidemic." Not surprisingly, many larger towns and cities had multiple ball courts, with one presumably fanatical Gulf Coast city containing as many as 24.

When it comes to figuring out what the game was like that took place in these courts, archaeologists have had to patch together scraps of evidence found among the crumbling ruins of ancient courts, a handful of descriptions from 16th-century Spanish chroniclers, and depictions of ballplayers in early pre-Hispanic art.

It's clear from the diverse representations of players, and variation in the features of the courts themselves, that the game took different forms in different regions and time periods. Most commonly, two teams of up to seven players would face off against each other, separated by a dividing line of some kind. Players would strike the ball with their arms, their shoulders, or, most often, their hips. Players wore a range of protective leather belts, gloves, and padding. Much as in tennis, points were scored when a ball was not returned or was knocked out of bounds or touched the wrong part of the body.

Against all imaginable odds, the ancient game of *ulama* has survived the rise and fall of the Olmec, Maya, and Aztec civilizations, the devastation and near genocide wrought by the Spanish conquest, and a string of modern revolutions, migrations, and social upheavals. Played today in just a handful of tiny, isolated villages in west Mexico, *ulama* is hanging on by a thread to a richer legacy than any other living sport can claim. But having made it this far, the game may now be facing extinction for the first time in its 3,500-year history.

The remaining players' relative poverty and geographic isolation, a lack of available natural rubber, and fierce competition from "newcomer" sports like baseball and volleyball have driven *ulama* to the brink. In Mexico, the threat has brought together an odd coalition of academics, athletes, and local businessmen trying to preserve and study it for clues to how the ancient Mesoamericans once lived and played.

A battered, sun-bleached sign announced our arrival in the village of Los Llanitos, population 151. In the car with me

were James Brady, an archaeologist from the California State University at Los Angeles, and his graduate student, Sergio Garza, from the University of California, Riverside. The hour-and-a-half drive from the beach resort of Mazatlán to our destination had brought us from a jammed coastal highway lined with fast-food joints and high-rise hotels to a bone-jarring dirt road that wound its way through withered cornfields.

At first blush, Brady and Garza appear to be the unlikeliest of sports fans. Brady, a red-haired midcareer academic steeped in the esoterica of ancient Maya ritual, and Garza, a young up-and-coming Mexican archaeologist of Huichol Indian descent, have spent most of their careers doing archaeological investigations of Maya caves. Even by day they sport flashlights on their belts, as if a dark, unexplored crevice might present itself at any moment.

Back in 2003, on their way home to California from a spelunking expedition in the Yucatán, Brady and Garza decided to take a detour through the coastal towns of Sinaloa, having heard that *ulama* was still being played nearby.

"For years," said Brady, "we archaeologists were stuck in a major rut. We'd go out, dig up an ancient ball court, date it, and publish an article about it. But we rarely learned anything interesting or new about the game that was played there." For him, *ulama* presented a live opportunity to conduct what's known in the field as ethnoarchaeology: by studying the modern game, he and his colleagues hope to better understand its past. "For so long, archaeology had ball courts without people in them. By recording the game as it's

played today, we're putting the sport, the enjoyment, and the competition back into the ball court."

Just past a church and a corral packed with cattle, Brady, Garza, and I pulled up to the tin-roofed home of 28-year-old farmer Chuy Páez. Tan, trim, and wearing buffed cowboy boots and a large silver belt buckle, Chuy (pronounced "Chewy") stepped over a dog sleeping in the shade of the porch and extended a hearty welcome.

Inside his concrete-floor bedroom we encountered Chuy's personal Wall of Fame. In one photograph, he's captured in midair, arms out and hip thrust forward, just seconds after striking the ball. In another, Chuy's 11-year-old son, Chuyito, posed proudly in his deerskin loincloth, holding a ball that looked to be nearly half his size. As we toured the gallery, Chuy reached up into the rafters of his house and untied a rubber ball, his prized possession, from a hanging neckerchief.

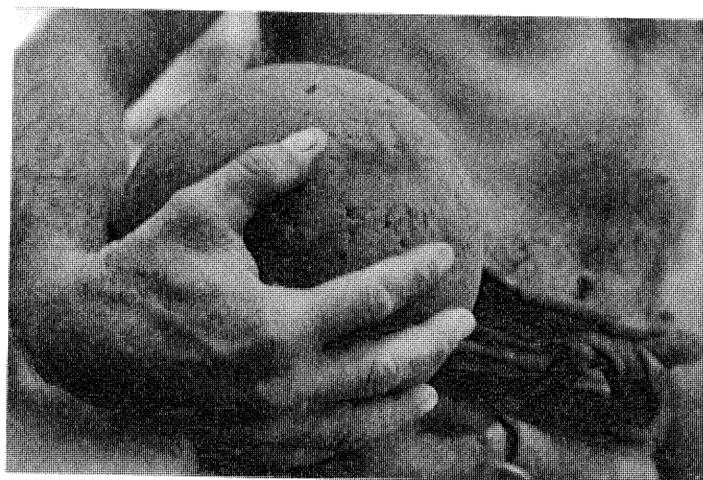
Leading us back outside, Chuy positioned me in one corner of the porch and walked 10 feet to the opposite corner.

"*¿Listo?*" he asked with a grin. "Ready?"

I nodded tentatively. He bounced the black ball—a little smaller than a bowling ball—across the patio floor. As I reached out to catch it, the ball's nine-pound solid mass smashed through my hands and into my chest, almost knocking me to the ground.

Brady laughed, having warned me earlier of the ball's punishing weight and superball-like action. "See what I mean?"

For me, absorbing the ball's impact for the first time was



A player holds an *ulama* ball.

a moment of utter revelation. I'd written a 300-page doctoral dissertation and several academic articles on the ancient game and had lectured on the topic at conferences. I'd dissected the game's ritual meaning and political symbolism and diligently pieced together and cataloged thousands of pottery fragments excavated from the ruins of courts. But I'd never before felt the blow of a ball against my body.

"It's one of those things you can read about all you want," said Brady, "but until you feel it for yourself and have the bruise to show for it, it's meaningless."

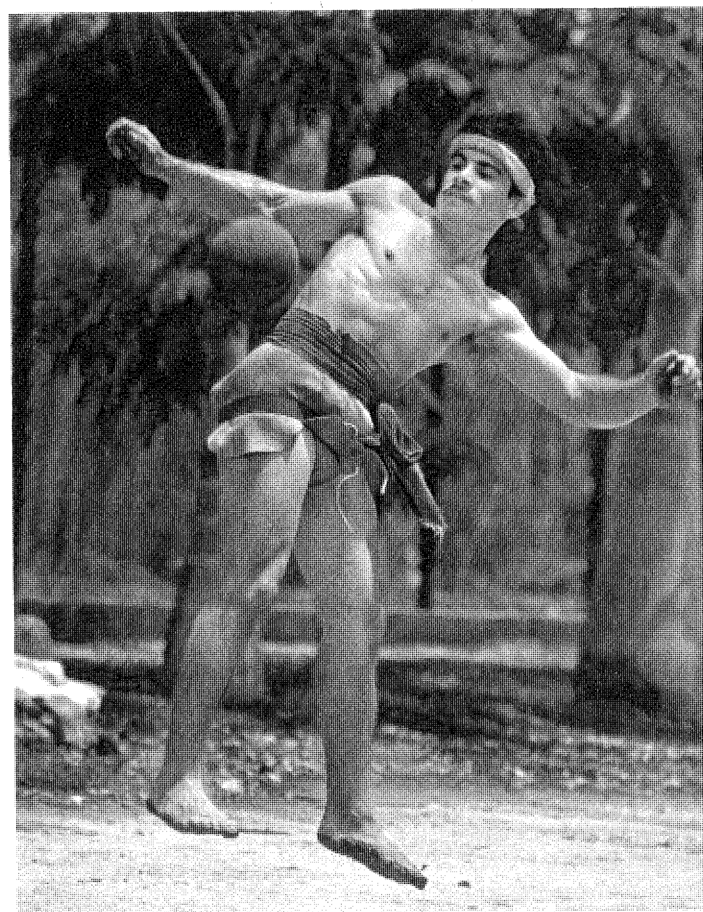
With virtually no real-world experience playing a game in which hands, feet, and sticks are all considered off-limits, it had always struck me as odd that the ancient Maya and Aztecs played ball with, of all body parts, their hips. But in that moment I finally understood why. The hip is one of the only parts of the body that can safely withstand the force of

a solid, heavy rubber ball without risk of serious injury or death. At the time of the conquest, Diego Durán had described games where Aztec players were killed when the ball "hit them in the mouth or the stomach or the intestines." And even when they struck the ball properly, the players still "got their haunches so mangled that they had those places cut with a small knife and extracted blood which the blows of the game had gathered."

After sharing a huge midafternoon lunch of *pozole*, a traditional Mexican hominy stew, with Chuy's extended family, we followed him across town to the playing field, or *taste* (pronounced TAS-tay). The word *taste* is thought to derive from *tlachtli* (TLASH-tli), the Aztec word for ball court, much as the name *ulama* derives from the Aztec word for rubber, *ulli*, and the ancestral game, *ullamalitzli*.

The Los Llanitos *taste* hardly suggests the grandeur of the ancient stadiums that were its precursors; it is a long, narrow alley of hard-packed clay, about 12 feet wide and the length of roughly half a football field, lined with palm trees and ringed by a chain-link fence. At two o'clock on a Sunday, the first of eight players arrived. He was soon joined by others in a corner of the court that seemed to serve as a makeshift locker room. They stripped to their underwear and put on four-piece leather-and-cloth girdles that protect the stomach, hips, and buttocks.

As the players took to the field to warm up, spectators staked out the best, and safest, spots—mostly in the end zones, the better to avoid a hurtling ball, which travels up-



ward of 30 miles per hour. Young boys, wearing smaller girdles and the occasional LA Dodgers baseball cap, imitated the adult players on the sidelines, while toddlers played safely outside the fence.

The game traditionally begins when a team of three to five players throws the ball high or rolls it low across a chalk-marked center line. Play continues back and forth, with

contestants using only their hips to strike the ball. A point is scored when a team fails to return the ball, as in tennis, or when the ball is driven past the opponent's end zone, as in football. Faults are called if a player hits the ball with a part of the body other than the hip or crosses the center line, among other reasons I failed to understand.

The first team to achieve eight points wins, though owing to a complex and utterly confounding scoring system that not only rewards points but also strips them away, games can go on for hours, or even days. One match on record from 1930, between the nearby villages of La Palma and Puerto de Las Canoas, is said to have lasted a week before La Palma claimed victory.

On November 8, 1519, the forces of Hernán Cortés first entered the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán, the ruins of which lie beneath the busy streets of Mexico City. The conquistadors were awestruck by the city's magnificent scale and grandeur. With an estimated population of more than 200,000, this city, built on a lake, was five times the size of Madrid and nearly three times the size of London at that time. While crossing one of the many causeways that connected the lakeshore to the city center, Bernal Diaz del Castillo, Cortés's personal chronicler, found himself at a rare loss for words: "I do not know how to describe it, seeing things as we did that had never been heard of or seen before, not even dreamed about."

Along with their accounts of monumental pyramids, lively marketplaces, and lavishly appointed royal palaces, the Spanish described with great interest the presence of ball

courts in the heart of the city's ceremonial precinct, and were captivated by the games that took place there:

> 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.
>
> The man who sent the ball through the stone ring was surrounded by all. They honored him, sang songs of praise to him, and joined him in dancing. He was given a very special award of feathers or mantles and breechcloths, something very highly prized. But what he most prized was the honor involved: that was his great wealth. For he was honored as a man who had vanquished many and had won a battle.

Not surprisingly, some chroniclers of the time compared *ulama* to the games they were familiar with back home, particularly tennis. Antonio Herrera y Tordesillas, described *ulama* as "being like our tennis" and repeatedly referred to the Aztec ball courts as simply "tennis-courts." Cortés was himself so delighted by the game that he brought a team of players back to Spain in 1528 to perform in the royal court of Charles V.

When my son Aidan was 8 we spent a family vacation in Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula. After days baking on the beach in the hot Caribbean sun, we packed into a jeep and drove to Cobá, an ancient trading center that at its peak had a population of more than 50,000. Entering the welcome tropical shade of the ruins, we rented bicycles and wound our way along ancient raised limestone roads, called *sacbe* by the Maya, that once connected Cobá to a network of other cities hundreds of miles away. Climbing 120 vertigo-inducing steps to the top of the site's highest pyramid, we gazed out across 50 square miles of jungle canopy, imagining the scene as it might have appeared 1,000 years earlier: colorful temples, children chasing each other through streets and courtyards, bustling markets filled with goods from distant ports—and somewhere down there, a game of *ulama* under way in the site's ball game stadium.

We descended carefully, got back on our bikes, and found our way to the ball court, a spectacular stone structure meticulously reconstructed by archaeologists. Facing each other across the 12-foot-wide alley, Aidan and I imagined ourselves as ancient Mayan athletes. I explained how we would have knocked the rubber ball back and forth, banking it off the sloped playing walls to make it bounce and spin and ricochet off the hard playing surfaces. I pointed out the small vertical hoops—the *tlachtemalacatl*, as the Aztecs referred to them—protruding from either side at a height of 10 feet or so off the alley floor.

"They had to get the ball through those?" asked Aidan. "With their hips?!"

That was the game clincher, I explained. There were other ways to score points and win, like field goals and safeties in American football. The court was divided by a marker and further separated into zones by chalk lines that marked the alley, as in a tennis court. Aidan nodded, struggling to picture it. Aidan then shifted his gaze downward to examine the stone marker embedded in the center floor of the playing alley.

"Dad, why is there a skull in the middle of the court?"

The Spanish were asking the same question 500 years earlier when they first learned about the Aztec beliefs surrounding this game. That was when their delight at the game gave way to dismay. They noticed that prominent ball courts were often decorated with sculptures depicting skulls along with sinister-looking Aztec gods, which for these fanatical Catholics might as well have been images of the Devil himself. They soon learned that when important games were played, they were accompanied by elaborate pagan rituals. Herrera described in great detail how some "tennis-courts" were ritually consecrated before use:

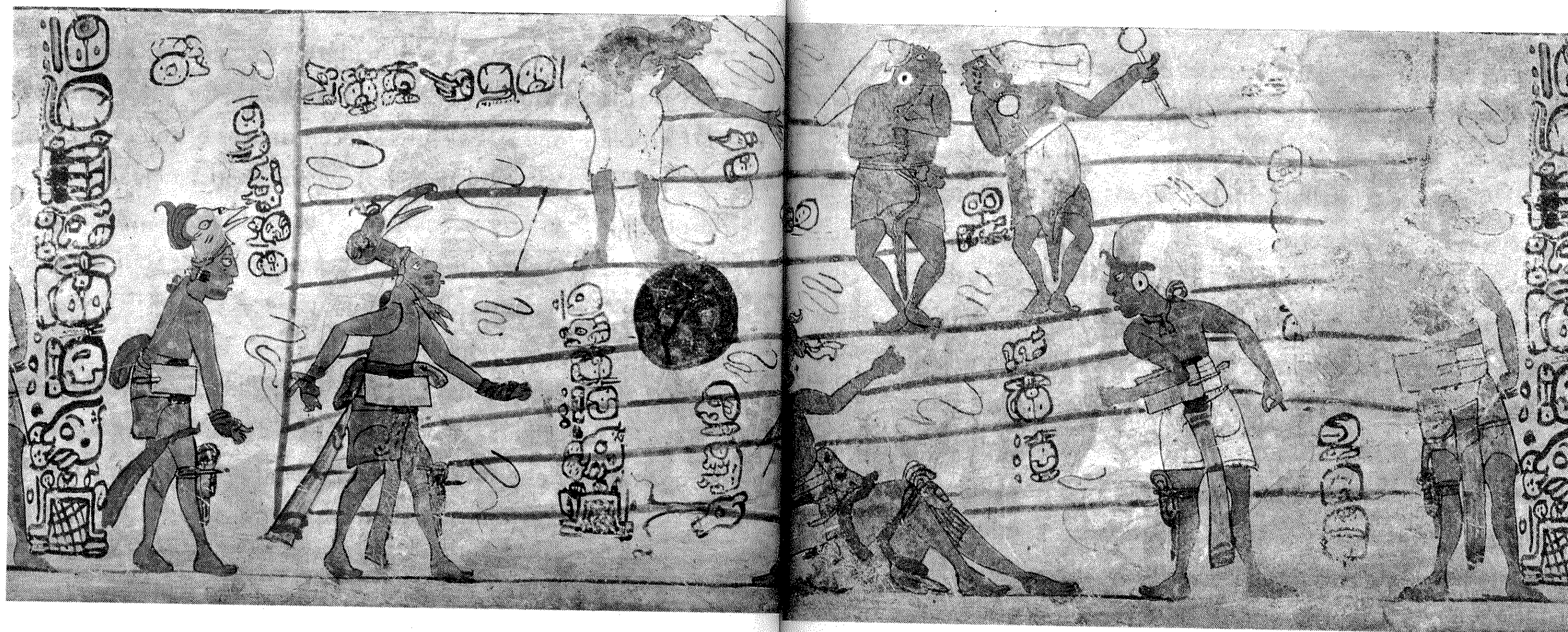
> On a lucky day, at midnight, they perform'd certain ceremonies and enchantments on the two inner walls, and on the midst of the floor, singing certain songs or ballads; after which a priest of the great temple went with some of the religious men to bless it; he uttered some words, threw the ball about the tennis-court four times and then it was consecrated, and might be play'd in, but not before.

And right next to the city's central *teotlachtli*, the "ball court of the gods," the Spanish encountered a grisly sight: a small structure, known as the *tzompantli*, lined with wooden racks that held the skewered skulls of thousands of slain war captives and sacrificial victims. *Ulama*, the Spanish discovered, was for the Aztecs as much a religious rite as it was an athletic contest—and it had a dark side unlike any sport that has been played before or since.

More than 1,000 years before the Spanish landed on the shores of Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula and began their con-

quest of the Aztecs, the Maya were playing ball in cities like Cobá scattered throughout the jungles, mountains, and lowlands of southern Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, and Guatemala. For the Maya, like the Aztecs, the ball game contest had profound symbolic meaning, featuring prominently in their most sacred creation story—the Maya equivalent of Genesis—known as the *Popol Vuh*.

Though it was first recorded in the mid-16th century in highland Guatemala, archaeologists have found scenes from the *Popol Vuh* depicted on painted pottery and ancient sculptures dating to the earliest periods of Maya history. The



Ancient Maya ballplayers compete as musicians sing and dance on a grandstand, from a polychrome vase, ca. AD 600–900.

creation story traces the many failed attempts by the gods to create humans. It centers on the exploits of two brothers, Hun Hunahpu and Vucub Hunahpu, and two hero twins who were born to one of the brothers.

The story begins with the first pair of brothers playing ball just above the entrance to the Maya underworld, called Xibalba. The lords of the underworld become annoyed by the incessant pounding of the rubber ball on the earth above, so they lure the brothers down to the ball court of Xibalba, where they are soon sacrificed. The gods decapitate Hun Hunahpu and hang his head in a calabash tree. One day, while a goddess is passing the tree, the brother's head spits into her hands, miraculously impregnating her. She gives birth to hero twins, who soon discover their father's ball game gear hidden in his house and start playing ball, again angering the lords of Xibalba.

History repeats itself as the twins are called down to the underworld to face a series of trials and to play ball against the gods. At one point, one of the twins is decapitated and his head is put into play as the ball, but the twins retrieve and reattach it, ultimately winning the contest against the lords of the underworld. In the process, they also defeat the forces of darkness and ascend into the heavens and bring light to the world as the sun and the planet Venus.

As art historian Mary Miller interprets the symbolic role of the ball game and ball court in the Maya creation, "Life is both taken and renewed in the ball court. The ball court is the place where fortunes are reversed, and then reversed again. It is the ultimate place of transition." This idea of transition, death, and renewal of life and fertility is a theme that crops up again and again in association with the Mesoamerican ball game. In the sacred books, or codices, of the Aztecs the bouncing ball was compared to the cosmic journey of the sun into and out of the underworld. Ritual ball games were played during key religious festivals to magically enact and maintain the cycles of nature and the cosmos.

The *Popol Vuh*, and a host of other accounts and visual depictions, leaves little doubt that the violent sacrifice of defeated players, or unlucky stand-ins captured in battle, was a postgame rite performed at some, though certainly not all, ball games. These sacrificial games were most likely part of elaborate ceremonies that took place after important battles, where war captives were forced to play against each other in life-or-death gladiatorial contests. The winners would presumably have had their lives spared, whereas the losers were decapitated, their hearts ripped out and offered up to the gods.

In one particularly gruesome depiction found on the walls of the monumental ninth-century Maya ball court at Chichén Itzá, in the Yucatán, serpents and squash plants sprout from the neck of a kneeling, decapitated ballplayer, bestowing fertility on the land and the living. The winning rival stands to the side, wielding a stone knife and the freshly severed head as his bloody trophy. Similar scenes connecting ball play and human sacrifice are repeated on sculptures, pottery, and paintings across Mesoamerica.

Scholars believe that these agonistic rites were played out again and again as reenactments of the creation story. Maya

kings, often identified as great ballplayers in hieroglyphic inscriptions, may even have dressed as the hero twins for important ceremonial games. In ball courts that served as symbolic portals to the underworld, these kings appeared before their subjects as the ultimate sports heroes—semidivine warriors and athletes capable not only of defeating their enemies but of vanquishing death and darkness and bringing life and light to the world. Whereas ordinary men played ordinary games with ordinary outcomes, went the message, kings played games of cosmic significance.

Of course, the nuances of the Mesoamerican belief system were of little interest to the Spanish friars who were intent on eradicating all traces of this diabolical pastime. In 1585 the Spanish authorities banned all ball games, citing their corrupting influences on native populations. But on the outer fringes of what was then New Spain, in the remote frontier villages of Sinaloa and Nayarit, the game managed to slip just below the radar of the centralized Spanish bureaucracy.

A handful of missionary and travelers' accounts of *ulama* from the 17th through the 19th centuries give a glimpse of a game still steeped in ceremony, though heads no longer rolled and hearts stayed safely in chests. According to a 17th-century account of a mountain tribe called the Acaxee, competitive ball games between villages involved the entire community and were accompanied by mock battles, singing, dancing, and elaborate feasts. Accounts of the same games from the early 20th century, however, reveal a tradition gradually stripped of most of its ceremony and cultural meaning—one in slow but steady decline.

Manuel Aguilar, an art historian working on the Ulama Project, has been investigating the modern game of *ulama* for traces of its ancient symbolism. "When the Spanish friars drove the game underground," said Aguilar, "it almost certainly lost most of its religious overtones." But some intriguing practices might be holdovers from the days when the game was more than a game. According to Spanish accounts, for example, the Aztecs played primarily on religious feast days; today in Los Llanitos, the game is played mostly on Christian holidays. And just as ancient ball courts were often associated with death and the underworld, as the *Popol Vuh* story makes clear, today's *tastes* tend to be located next to village cemeteries.

Not that *ulama* was ever an entirely spiritual affair. Even when players weren't risking their heads and hearts to the game, there were some pretty high stakes involved. Elite sponsors provided housing and food for the best ballplayers, trained them rigorously and then challenged other teams to competition, wagering significant sums on the outcome. Durán describes how some players "gambled their homes, their fields, their corn granaries, their maguey 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."

After a day in Los Llanitos, I hopped back into our jeep with Chuy and the archaeologists and drove 12 windy miles to the rival village of El Quelite to track down local *ulama* legend Rafael Lizárraga y Barra. El Huilo, "the skinny one,"

as he's known to his friends and fans, is the oldest living *ulama* player. At 95, he still has the cockiness and competitive streak of a revered athlete, despite the fact that it's been 30 or so years since he last put hip to ball.

Within minutes of pulling up at his modest roadside house, El Huilo, without provocation or the benefit of teeth, began teasing and baiting Chuy, strutting like a cock in a hen house. "Ha! You players today! You're just sissies compared to how we were!" Chuy unwrapped his ball from the folds of his neckerchief and bounced it over to the old man. El Huilo caught the ball expertly, turned it in his bony hands, clearly assessing its quality. Bouncing it up and down like a kid, he recalled the days when sponsors would take him and other players "into the hills" for intensive periods of training. "The man who used to organize the games really watched the players. He wouldn't let them have any women or drink. And since we couldn't work while they were training, he'd take care of us, like good horses."

"And the women," he broke into a wide, toothless grin and swiveled his hips. "The women *loved* us ballplayers because we knew how to move our hips, if you know what I mean . . ."

Back in his youth, when *ulama* was literally the only game in town, money was always on the line when the players stepped on the court—just as in the days of the Aztecs and the Maya.

"What was your most memorable game?" I asked.

He described point for point an epic two-day battle with a neighboring village. "They said I hit the ball so hard that day

it looked like I wanted to kill someone!" He wasn't just playing, but was betting his opponents 20 pesos a point. "Boy, I made a lot of money that day!" he laughed, rubbing his hands together, still pleased with his performance—which, I came to learn, took place in 1934.

Back then, *ulama* dominated the western Mexican sports annals, and being a top player could win you fortune, fame, and women. But today, few local youths are interested in taking up a sport as obscure, difficult, and physically punishing as *ulama*. The day I watched Chuy and his teammates face off on the *taste*, 20 or so teenagers packed the nearby volleyball court. I couldn't resist asking Chuy which was harder, volleyball or *ulama*.

He looked at me and scoffed. "*Ulama*, of course! It takes years of practice and most players don't have what it takes. You can't have fear. You need to be strong." The implication was clear: volleyball, unlike *ulama*, is no sport for real men.

There are no opportunities for scholarships or professional contracts for *ulama* players. Although Chuy and other players have been invited to faraway Cancún to perform for tourists in faux-Maya extravaganzas—complete with drums, feather headdresses, and face paint—most decline, regarding the displays as exploitative and inaccurate. On the website of Xcaret, a beach resort south of Cancún on the Mayan Riviera, ballplayers are shown prancing about in campy costumes that would be perfectly at home in the Broadway production of *The Lion King*. The accompanying copy claims that "Xcaret has rescued and disseminated a millenary tradition. What was once only imagined from the archaeological

remains of ball courts throughout Mesoamerica has come spectacularly to life at Xcaret." Of course, given the choice, some things may be better off left to the imagination. For Chuy and his teammates, *ulama* is an aggressive blood sport, not a curiosity to be exploited for tourist theater—especially if there are feathers involved.

But as challenging as it might be to keep the *ulama* tradition intact and alive among the younger generation in the face of competition from modern alternatives, the game's survival may ultimately hinge on something far more basic: the availability of rubber to make balls.

At one time, Los Llanitos and the surrounding lowlands was a booming center of rubber production. The Codex Mendoza, a 16th-century Aztec document, records that a nearby area of coastal Mexico paid an annual tribute of some 50 tons of rubber to the Aztec ruler, to be used for medicinal, utilitarian, and ritual purposes—including the production of balls. Brady's team calculated it would have taken about 1,300 acres of land and 427 full-time rubber tappers to meet this annual levy.

But since then, the rubber trees that once grew here have been wiped out by the spread of beach resorts and other coastal developments, and the people of Los Llanitos now have to travel hundreds of miles into neighboring Durango, a region increasingly under the control of local drug lords, to find rubber trees to tap. A recent chilling news story underscores the challenge presented by the drug trade in this region. The body of a member of the Juarez drug cartel was left in seven pieces on the streets of a town to the north of Mazatlán. In what

almost seemed a sadistic homage to the region's ancient sacrificial rites, the victim's face was stitched onto a soccer ball and left in a plastic bag in front of the town hall!

As a result of rubber's scarcity and the dangers involved in acquiring it in Mexico's wild west, the price of a single *ulama* ball has soared to a staggering $1,000—about $250 more than the annual income of the average player. Remarkably, Chuy's prize ball is one of only three balls in Los Llanitos and the only one in good enough shape for competition. Being made of natural rubber, the more the ball is used, the more it shrinks and deforms over time.

Which leads to the question: How can you keep a ball game alive if you don't have balls to play with?

A Mazatlán businessman and longtime supporter of the game, Jesús Gómez, has taken the lead in the search for an answer, and the Ulama Project's researchers have teamed up with members of the Mazatlán Historical Society to experiment with commercial latex imported from as far away as New York City. "If we can't get natural rubber," said Gómez, "we need to find another way. Otherwise, *ulama* will not survive. It's that simple."

So far, though, artificial rubber has failed to replicate the look or feel and, most important, the remarkable bouncing properties of traditional balls. "Look at this," said Chuy after the game at Los Llanitos. He dropped a lumpy white blob of low-grade latex, the result of Gómez's latest experiments, and watched it bounce erratically off his patio.

"This doesn't work," he exclaimed with visible disgust. "It's not natural rubber!"

As the owner of the town's lone regulation ball, Gómez suggested, Chuy may have a vested interest in making sure no substitute is found. "Unfortunately, the ball has come to symbolize control of the game." And for Chuy and his teammates, debates about the ball and the game seem to feed their sense of competition: Who's going to decide the future of *ulama*—the players who remain or some well-meaning but meddlesome academics and outsiders?

As I expressed my thanks to the players and their families who had hosted me in Los Llanitos and got ready to head back to Mazatlán, Chuy pulled me away from the other visitors and project members and cornered me with his prized ball in hand, determined to have the final word.

"This ball is special. It's made from a process that's thousands of years old."

He dropped the smooth, heavy mass into my hands. "This ball," he said, as if holding it were the only way to really understand, "is not of these times."