



Yoke from Veracruz (green stone),
National Museum of Anthropology, INAH, Mexico City.

The Ball Game

A Ritual of Pride

The ball game was one of the complex rituals that colored the religious lives of the pre-Columbian peoples. This ancient tradition is one of the many cultural traits that made it possible to unify the vast territory from what is now central Mexico to Central America. Playing courts have even been found in the southern part of the United States. *Tlachtli*, as the game is called in Nahuatl, was not played for mere sport.

So important was the game in spiritual life that more than 600 *tlachtli* courts have been found so far in Mesoamerica, in most of the ceremonial centers discovered until now.

The court, shaped like a Roman numeral "I", was called *teotlachco* and represented the universe with its high walls and markers through which the ball was thrown. The courts are aligned with the stars astronomically depending on when they were built. The oldest point north-south and those built during and after the middle classical age face east-west. The chroniclers of the ball game describe it as follows: the players stood at either end of the field and threw a small, hard rubber ball (about the size of a man's head); the players could hit the ball with their hands and feet, using a mallet or stick, and with their shoulders and hips (this particular technique, called *ullamalitzli*, was the most common). Since it is quite difficult to get the ball through the hoop, there may well have been other

ways of scoring points on the field. Some of the markers are intricate animal-shaped statues with a round cavity through which the ball can go.

The *ollamani*, or player, was supposed to train to perfection, become highly specialized, and acquire a following and popularity which brought him recognition in the group.

According to Spanish chroniclers, the ball court's central field was 43 x 12 meters and each of the end fields was 35 x 12 meters. They can be reconstructed because of the essential similarity that they maintained for thousands of years in all of Mesoamerica, with only slight variations given the architectural style prevalent in each culture.

The stands were filled with expectant spectators, anxious to see the end result of the contest, which was consummated with an offering of human blood and death. From the pre-Hispanic perspective this represented the sacrifice of life to perpetuate life. The enemy vanquished in war kept his honor because he was allowed to die in the games.

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Sources: Catalogue "Dioses del México Antiguo" (Mexico City: UNAM- CNCA-DDF, 1995), pp. 57, 60, 63, 65.

María Teresa Uriarte, comp., *El juego de pelota en Mesoamérica. Raíces y supervivencia* (Mexico City: Siglo XXI-DIFOCUR Sinaloa, 1992), p. 48.

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Voices of Mexico wishes to apologize to the editors of Ciencias
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