



Figure 1. Shown in sculpture are ball game players of Mexico, 957 A.D. (Tarascan). Seated on the stadium's sides, spectators watch ball players.

The Ball Game 1000 Years Ago

The roots of modern football are bathed in blood. An anthropologist recalls all the violence and charm of the ancient Indian ball game.

By STEPHAN BORHEGYI, with illustrations by TOM P. SEALE

IT IS A BRISK FALL AFTERNOON in the year of 957 A. D.

There is a thrill of expectation in the air, for it is the day of the big game. Since early morning the roads into town have been filled with eager visitors. Many of them have left their homes in the early morning hours in order to take advantage of the gala market and to assure themselves of good seats at the ball game.

By noon the town is crowded. Everyone is dressed in his best finery. Many have brought lunches and can be seen eating in shady spots on the outskirts of town, while

others prefer to buy a hot meal at the food stalls which have been set up around the market place.

As the hour of the game approaches there is a flow of movement toward the big ball court. Outside vendors hawk their wares in hopes of a few last minute sales. Inside the band is playing and there is much good-natured jostling as the people settle themselves for the big event. Final bets are in the making when there is a roar from the crowd.

The team has just made its appearance. A moment later another roar from the

opposite side of the court announces the arrival of the opposing team on the field. Finally the referee takes his place in the center of the court and gives the signal. The ball bounces into the air and the game has begun. (See Figure 1.)

If all this sounds vaguely familiar to the reader of 1957 it is as it should be. Had it not been for the sporting enthusiasm of our Indian predecessors on this continent the competitive ball game, as we know it today, might never have come into existence.

Not only were these enterprising people responsible for the discovery of rubber and

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its usefulness in the form of a rubber ball, but they may have done much to influence the form in which our modern games of ball are played.

When the Spanish arrived to conquer the New World early in the 16th century they first witnessed the ball game—which at that time was already 500 years old—in Mexico and the Antilles. They marvelled at the ball that was solid and heavy and yet bounced so vigorously.

The Spanish chronicler Torquemada (1613) left us the following description: "It has one property which is that it jumps and rebounds upward, and continues jumping here to there so that those who run after it become tired before they catch it."¹

Prior to this the only balls known in Europe were made of leather and were filled with hair or an inflated bladder. It was not long thereafter that rubber, and the rubber ball, was introduced to Spain and the rest of Europe, along with various descriptions of the New World ball games.

We know that a type of hand game, the

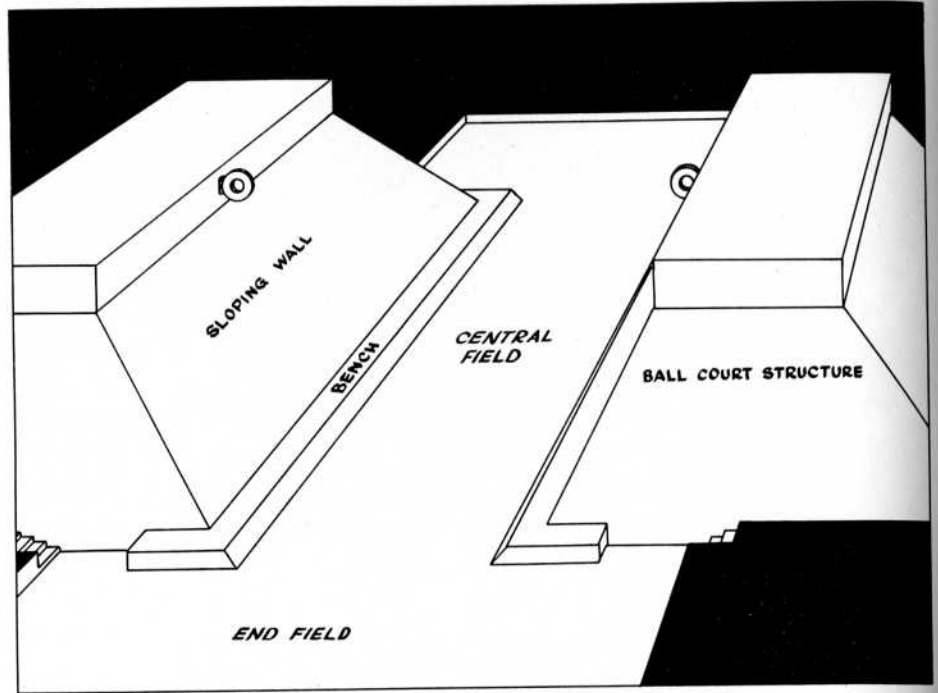


Figure 2. An isometric reconstruction drawing of an ancient ball court in Mexico (Yagul, Oaxaca).

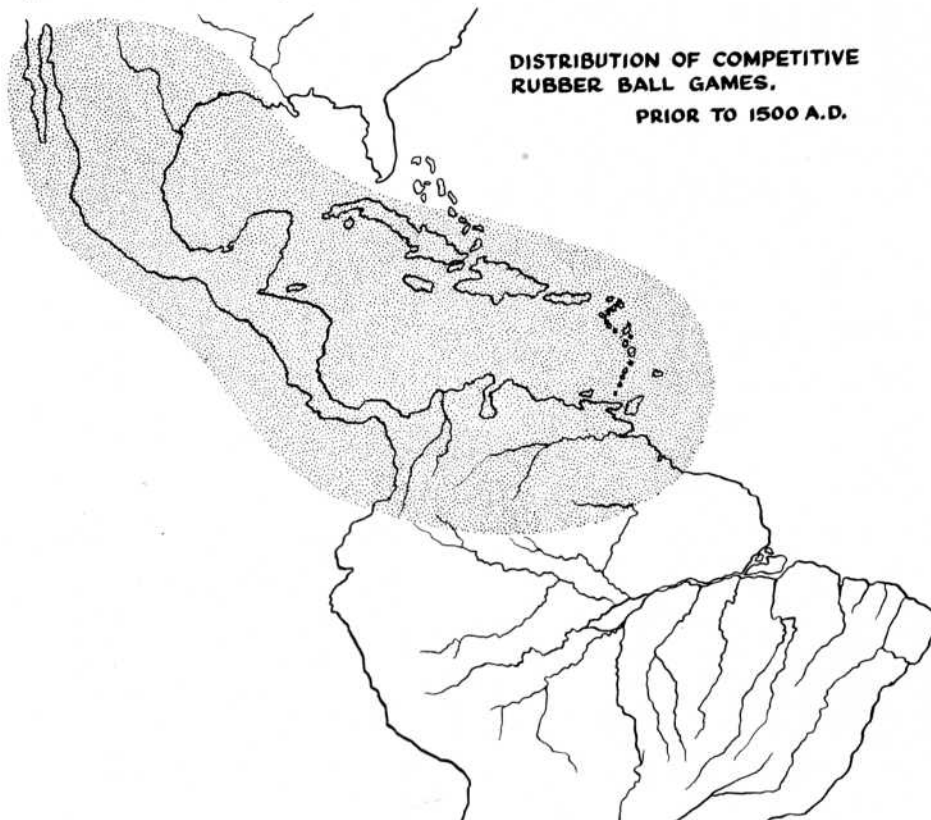
pallone, was popular in Spain, France and

Italy during the 15th century. This game had Mediterranean origins and seems to have been the predecessor of modern tennis. The idea of two organized teams engaged in inter-village competitive play was, however, most probably a novelty to the European and this example from the New World may have been responsible for the birth of modern team sport.

The Middle American ball game, as described to us by Spanish chroniclers, was a cross between basketball, football, hockey and jai alai. It was played in high walled courts (100 to 125 feet long and 20 to 50 feet wide) whose floor plans were the shape of a capital "I." The game had as its object the knocking of a solid rubber ball 6 to 8 inches in diameter through the stone rings set vertically in the center of each of the two long walls. The diameter of the ring varied from 6 to 12 inches which made the scoring of a goal a rather difficult task. (See Figure 2.)

The number of players varied. There were amateur and professional teams and nearly every settlement of any size boasted at least one ball court. In some contests large teams—9 to 11 players—were used, while in others only two expert players took part. How the ball game was put into play is not known but, once begun, the players performed with such skill and dexterity that there were times when the heavy rubber ball did not touch the ground for the duration of an hour, during which it

Figure 3. Distribution of competitive ball games in New World prior to the Conquest (1500 A.D.).



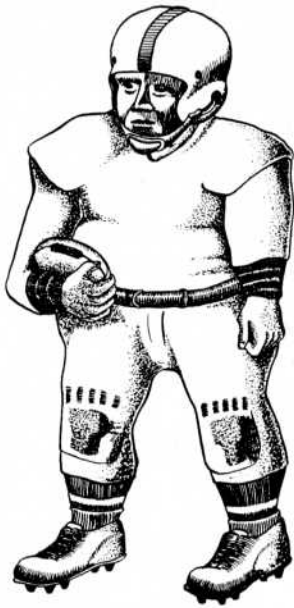


Figure 4a. Modern O. U. football player (at left) in full uniform as seen by artist Tom P. Seale. Compare him with player at right.



Figure 4b. Maya ball game player (at right), fully equipped and ready for the game. Player wears body paddings. (Circa 900 A.D.)

flew from one end of the ball court to the other. The other team scored whenever a shot was missed, or when the ball was hurled into the end zone of the opposing side.

The bouncing of the ball against the side walls was quite important and many of the finer tricks of the game were apparently based on this point. The most important score was made, however, when the ball was sent through the stone ring. This was so difficult that it was accomplished only rarely, and when it happened the game was concluded in great excitement and applause. The "star" player who accomplished this feat won not only the game but was entitled to collect the clothing and jewels of the spectators. Generally a merry

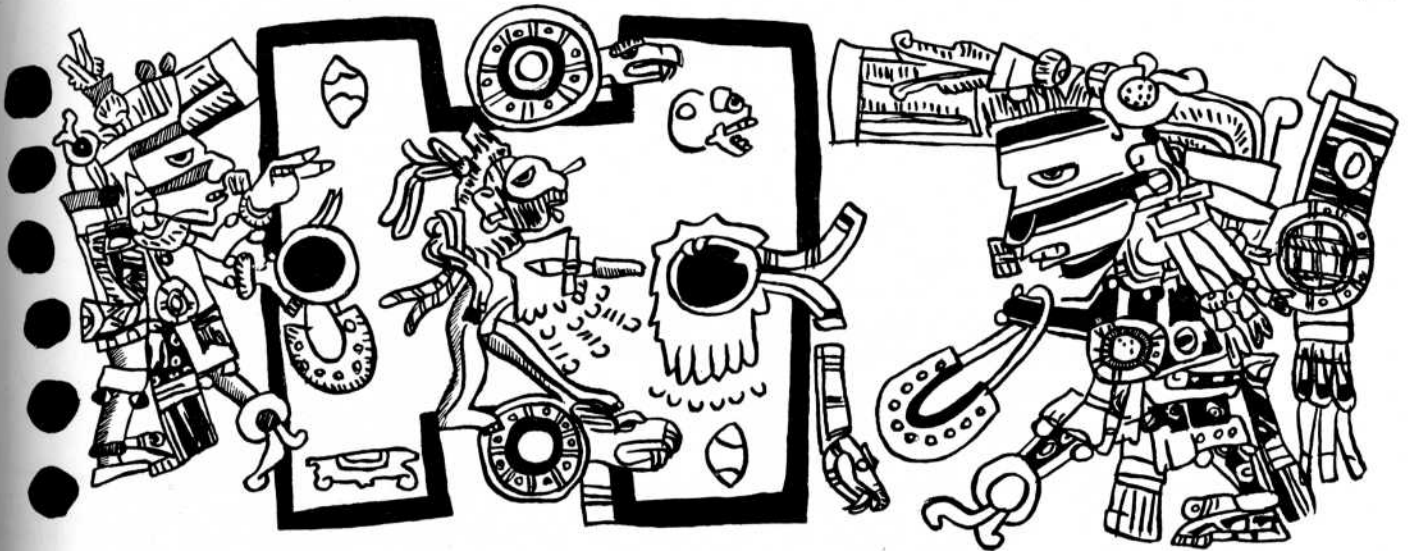
scramble ensued and there was a mass exodus of all those present in the grandstand.

"Star" players were highly honored by chiefs and commoners alike, but since the game was so strenuous it is hard to imagine that they could have remained at the top of their form for long. The heavy ball was not allowed to come into contact with the hands, feet or calves, but was propelled only by the elbows, knees and hips. Injuries sustained in the game often developed into serious bone ailments in spite of the fact that padded knee, hip and elbow guards were used. (See Figure 4b.)

An eyewitness account by the chronicler Duran (1585) gives us some idea of the casualties that happened not infrequently during the course of the game: "Some of

them were carried dead out of the place and the reason was that as they ran, tired and out of breath, after the ball from one end to the other, they would see the ball come in the air and in order to reach it first before others would rebound on the pit of their stomach or in the hollow, so that they fell to the ground out of breath, and some of them died instantly, because of their ambition to reach the ball before anybody else . . . They were so quick to hit it with their knees or seats that they returned the ball with extraordinary velocity. With these thrusts they suffered great damage on the knees or on the thighs, with the results that those who for smartness often used them, got their haunches so mangled that they had those places cut with a small knife and

Figure 5. Sacrifice of the losing team's captain (by decapitation) with an obsidian knife in the middle of the ball court (Codex Borgia).



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extracted blood which the blows of the ball had gathered.”²

In spite of the fact that players occasionally died and often were severely wounded, the rewards of being a “star” were so great that these dangers were considered inconsequential.

There was even greater risk involved for the team captains. The winning captain was overwhelmed with honors and gifts but the unfortunate captain of the losing team was not infrequently decapitated as a sacrifice to the gods! (See Figure 5.) A modern parallel is the case of the hapless coach who is fired after a losing season as a sacrifice to the “almighty” alumni.

The rather harsh treatment of the losing captain becomes somewhat more understandable to us when we realize the extent of the gambling which invariably accompanied the game. Both the players and the spectators laid wagers on the outcome of the contest, the stake varying with the status and wealth of the individual. Rulers might play for principalities or kingdoms, as when the ruler of Tenochtitlan—today Mexico City—wagered his entire yearly income against that of the ruler of Xochimilco.

Lesser nobles and chiefs played for jades and turquoise, jewelry of gold, feather

robes, articles of clothing, cocoa, cornfields, houses, and for slaves and concubines. The common people, since their means were less, wagered fields, crops, granaries, and houses, and sometimes even sold themselves or their children into slavery to meet their bets.

Chronicler Duran² tells us that at nightfall on the day before the game those gam-

blers took the ball and placed it on a plate with other items of ball game equipment. They then worshipped it and made offerings to it, praying fervently that it should be favorable the following day.

As the hour of the game approached, the stone or wooden images of the patron gods

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Figure 6. Dignitary arriving at the ball game on the equivalent of a modern Cadillac (Codex Magliabechi, 23). Trumpeter announces his arrival.

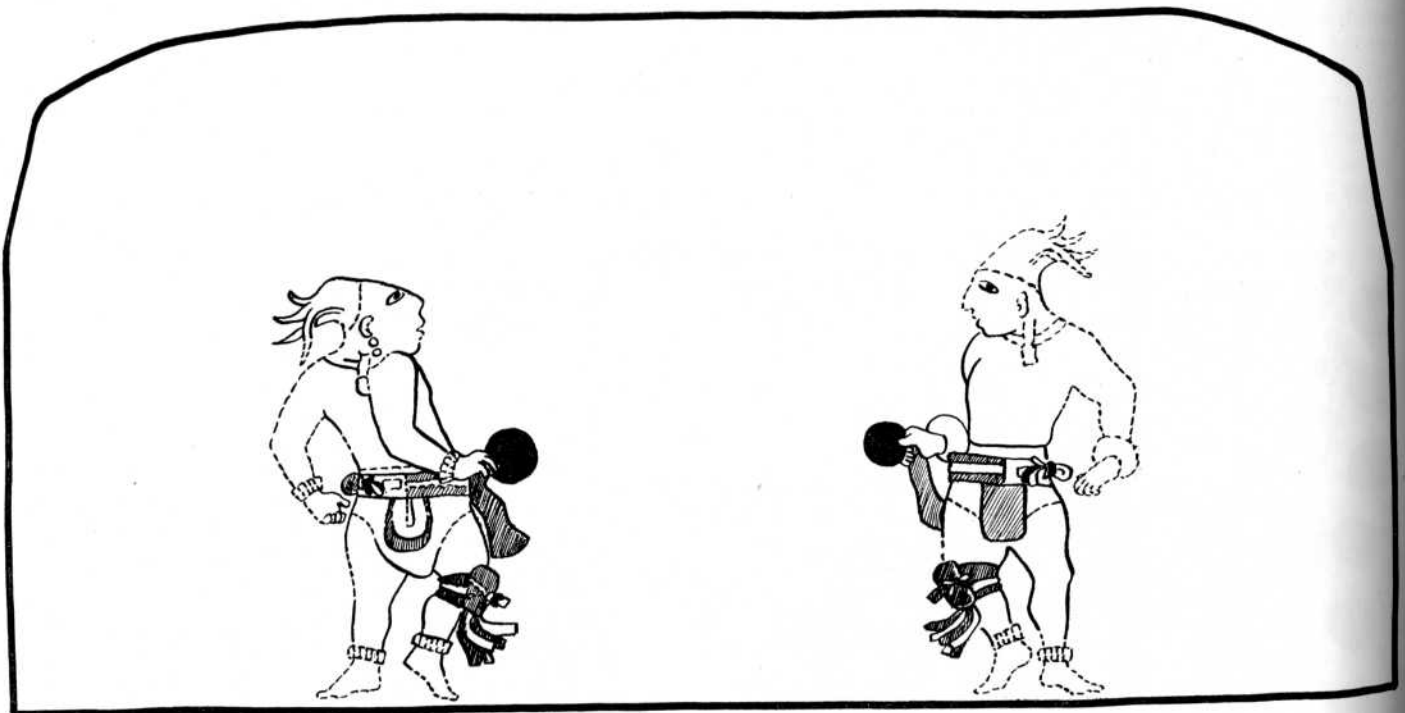


Figure 7. Maya ball players (Piedras Negras). These men played ball more earnestly than their modern counterparts. The ball game was sometimes a substitute for war, inspired fantastic wagers. The final score could bring either death or wealth to the captain of the ball team.

Tom J. McDonald, Jr., '57geol, works for Humble Oil Company in New Orleans, Louisiana. McDonald lives in nearby Metairie.

Lieut. James K. Thompson, '57eng, has just completed the 14-week associate company officer course under the Reserve Forces Act program at The Ordnance School, Aberdeen Proving Ground, Maryland. Thompson studied tactics and staff procedures, ordnance service management and material familiarization.

Donald H. Hinkle, '57journ, now works for Gulf States Utilities Company at Beaumont, Texas. Hinkle is in the public relations department.

Ollie D. Whittern, '57journ, Maud, has been named assistant advertising manager of the Texas Employers' Insurance Association, Employers Casualty Company and Employers National Insurance Company, Dallas, Texas. Whittern has been doing editorial and advertising work on the *Maud Enterprise*.

MARRIAGES: Miss Sidney Swinney, '57h.ec, Pauls Valley, and Fred Polley, Hobart, were married September 14 in the First Presbyterian Church in Pauls Valley. The couple live in Norman where Polley is attending the University.

Miss Carlene Cone, '57, Yukon, and James O. Edwards, '55bus, '57Law, Hobbs, New Mexico, were married in Yukon recently. The couple plan to live in Hobart, Oklahoma.

Miss Joyce Michie, '57, McAlester, and David D. Lemmons, Jr., were married September 27 in Wichita Falls, Texas. Mrs. Lemmons is interning at St. Anthony's Hospital as a medical technologist.

Miss Kathleen Jean Mavourneen Haynes, '57, Ponca City, and Ralph L. Howell, Tulsa, were married recently in Grace Episcopal Church, Ponca City. They plan to live in Norman while Howell completes his work at the University.

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were brought in procession from their temples and placed in the top-center of the grandstand much like the mascots of modern teams. Then the two teams, having spent an all-night vigil of prayer over their equipment, took their places in the court.

From the foregoing it is clear that the Middle American ball games had a strong religious and ceremonial importance in addition to their secular aspect. Even the gods were believed to be ardent players in their heavenly courts, like the vigorous athletic gods of the Greeks, and the ball game was a favorite means of settling their divine disputes. (See Cover.)

This gives us a clue to the underlying nature of the game itself, which was in many cases to provide an outlet for aggressive attitudes toward neighboring groups and a means, short of warfare, for settling inter-village disputes. Today, a thousand years later, we can see the same principle in action when rivalry between towns, schools or universities is taken care of by competitive sports in order to work off hostilities in harmless play.

It is clear, therefore, that ball games can mean different things, at different times, to different people.

To children it is a game.

To the casual spectator it means a day of excitement and vicarious thrills.

To the alumni it means an opportunity to renew old sentiments and loyalties and to experience again, with the university student, the pride in the team and the hostility toward those who would challenge it.

To the football player it means an oppor-

tunity to gain fame and importance in the eyes of his friends and his university.

To the professional player it means fortune.

To the coach it means science.

And to the archaeologist it represents an additional link with the almost forgotten past.

¹ Torquemada, Juan de, "Los Viente i un Libros Rituales i Monarchia Indiana," Madrid, 1723.

² Duran, Diego, "Historia de las Indias de Nueva Espana y Islas de Tierra Firme," Mexico, 1867-80.

AUTHOR AND ARTIST

Dr. Stephan Borhegyi has been director of the University's Stovall Museum and assistant professor of anthropology since 1954. A native of Budapest, Hungary, he received his doctor's degree from Peter Pazmany University there, then left the country when communism gained control. He has taught at San Carlos University, made several visits to Central America (first in 1949 for the Carnegie Institution), and is an authority on anthropology, Egyptology and classical archaeology. This article is his first contribution to Sooner Magazine since July, 1955, when he published "The Roots of Communism in Central America."

Tom P. Seale, fine arts junior from Enid, is majoring in commercial art. He regularly works for the Museum, preparing detailed maps and other carefully plotted illustrations such as those appearing on the cover and with Borhegyi's article.



The Pride of Mexico, musicians playing at the ball game (1400 A.D., Codex Florentino, XXIII-19), may be compared by way of their intent if not by way of numerical strength.