

### Hohokam Ballcourts

Balls courts were an important part of the ancient civilizations. The ancient Hohokam culture of Arizona constructed at least 200 ball courts more than 800 years ago. The northernmost ball courts were located near Flagstaff, Arizona, whereas the southernmost Hohokam-style ballcourt site is in northern Mexico. Early archaeologists believed that these structures were reservoirs. However, when excavated it showed no evidence of water deposited sediments no fine layers of silts and clays that would have settled to the bottom of standing water.

The first version of the ballgame was played more than 3,000 years ago in the region around what is today Veracruz, Mexico. More imposing areas which consisted of a flat rectangular surface set between two parallel stone walls. Each side could have a large vertical stone ring set high into the wall. The walls could be perpendicular or sloping away from the players and the ends of the court could be left open but defined using markers or, in other layouts, a wall closed off the playing space to create an I-shaped court. Ballcourts were fast-paced, often brutal games tied in with religious ritual, contestants often lost their lives and human sacrifices were regular occurrences.

The game is like a cross between soccer and basketball, except much much more difficult to play. The object of the game was for the two opposing sides to try and hit the hard rubber ball into a stone hoop placed at both ends of the playing field. You could only pass and shoot the ball using your thighs and hips. The ball game was a team event played on a special court with a solid rubber ball. The size and weight of the ball varied from site to site and through time.

Some archaeologists have suggested that the size of the ball was determined by the size of the hole in the stone scoring ring mounted on the side of the ball court. The ball could be up to eight inches in diameter which is about the size of the modern volleyball, and could weigh nine pounds or more. At times, human sacrifice was associated with it. This may have been the sacrifice of the losing team. The Mayan site of El Tajín has 17 courts which have been uncovered by archaeologists. As early as 1700 BC, the ancient Mesoamer used the courts for religious and ritualistic purposes, and they also used these early rubber balls for various sports.

The game was played in Central America and parts of North America before being banned by the Spanish conquistadors. Ball games were violent and dangerous and players wore protective gear, usually made of leather, such as helmets, knee pads, arm and chest protectors. They offered wealth and prestige to the winners, but losers sometimes paid the ultimate price as a sacrifice to their gods. Even winners might be injured because the ball was heavy and dangerous. Spanish conquerors were amazed by the speed and movement of the rubber balls. The players wore elaborate protective gear and gloves, as well as a "yoke" around the waist to

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propel the ball. Archaeologists call the special protection constructed for the hips "yokes", for the resemblance to animal yokes.

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