

# MESOAMERICAN BALLGAME

PHYSICAL EDUCATION, GRADES 5–8



“So tell me the rules!”

“Two teams—like doubles tennis, but no net and no rackets. Use your hips; no hands, no feet. Got it?”

Max pointed at a stone ring high up on the side wall. “Is that the basket? Because that looks impossible!”

“No, that’s just a marker. Think tennis, not basketball. You score if the other side can’t return, or if they hit out—”

Her voice was drowned out by the trumpet and drums. The crowd picked up the rhythm, and the frenzied stamping of their feet echoed through the ball court.

*The Jaguar Stones, Book Three: The River of No Return, page 240*

---

## ESSENTIAL QUESTION:

What was the cultural and spiritual significance of the Mesoamerican Ballgame?

### Sub questions:

- How was the ancient Mesoamerican Ballgame played?
- How is it similar to and different from today’s ball games?
- What are the origins of the ball games we play today?

---

## MATERIALS / RESOURCES:

- Access to research materials and the Internet.
- Kickballs or volleyballs, basketball court, masking tape to mark serve line and court boundaries, knee pads if available.
- Rules and court design sheet (provided).

---

**OBJECTIVES:****The student will know:**

- The history of the Mesoamerican Ballgame ('pitz') and its place in Maya mythology and society.
- How to work as a team to overcome challenges placed upon them by the physical restrictions of the game.

**The student will be able to:**

- Understand how 'pitz' compares and contrasts to modern ball games.
- Demonstrate a cultural understanding of the game and its place in ancient society.
- Engage in physical activity, group cooperation and friendly competition.

---

**RATIONALE:**

Pitz is the Maya name for the ballgame played by many Central American peoples. It originated around 2000 BC and was the first team sport in history. More than just a game, the contest was an important part of Maya spiritual beliefs. The game was highly symbolic to the ancient Maya, and was used as a metaphor to represent the struggle between life and death. Ballgames were often held as ritual events, some of which featured human sacrifice. Although archaeologists are unsure the details of how the game was originally played, a version of the ballgame called Ulama is still played in Mexico today.

Pitz was usually played by two to four-man teams on a large, "I" shaped court with sloping walls. In the most common version of the game, the players struck the ball using only their hips (although other versions were played using forearms, rackets, bats, or hand stones). The ball was made of solid rubber and weighed as much as 9 pounds. Like volleyball without a net, each team is confined to one half of the court. The ball is hit back and forth. Points are scored when the other team fails to return the ball, or it is hit out of bounds.

---

**KEY VOCABULARY:**

***Pitz/Pok-A-Tok:*** alternate names for the Maya version of the Mesoamerican Ballgame.

***Latex:*** the milky sap of certain trees and plants (including the rubber tree) that hardens on exposure to air.

***Vulcanization:*** the process of turning sticky latex into hardened, resilient rubber.

***Yoke:*** heavy padded belt worn by ball players.

---

**ACTIVITY 1: UNDERSTANDING THE MESOAMERICAN BALLGAME****Procedure:**

1. Introduce the idea that the indigenous cultures of Mexico and Central America were the first to invent a ballgame that was similar to ballgames we play today, and it played an important role in their lives.  
Review how Venn diagrams are a simple graphic tool for comparing similarities and differences.
2. Organize students into pairs or groups. Using research materials and the internet, the students will investigate the Maya Ballgame. (The interactive website <http://mesoballgame.org/ballgame> is an excellent resource for this.)
3. The students will create a Venn diagram comparing the Maya Ballgame with a modern spectator sport (eg tennis, volleyball, hockey) They should not only look at how the games are played, but also the cultural role of sport in society.
4. Groups share their diagrams with the class. Produce a whole-class Venn diagram showing the key similarities and differences students were able to discover.

**Closure:**

As a class, discuss the role ball games play in our and Maya society.

**Extension activities:**

1. Create a drawing/mural of the ball game in the Maya style.
2. Using modelling clay create a 3D model of the ballcourt, ballcourt markers or Maya ball player figurines.
3. Produce a Maya codex style book about the Maya ballgame.
4. Research how the Maya were able to make rubber balls 3,000 years before Charles Goodyear invented vulcanized rubber in 1839. What did the Maya use to “vulcanize” their rubber? Students can research and report on the chemistry involved in manipulating latex.
5. Read the K’iche’ Maya story of the Hero Twins and draw cartoon strip of depicting key scenes from the story.

---

**ACTIVITY 2: PLAYING THE GAME**

*Note: a rule sheet and court layout is attached*

**Procedure:**

1. **Watch:** As a class, watch the video of modern day Ulama. Discuss the rules and the different methods of hitting the ball. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=rReFhUtZzYc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rReFhUtZzYc)
2. **Practice:** Divide the class into small groups and let them practice passing the ball among their group members using only their hips. Low balls are hit by planting one arm on the ground and swinging the hips parallel to the ground.
3. **Team play:** Divide the class into teams of 4 to 6 players and practice game play. The aim is to hit the ball back and forth until one side misses the ball or hits it out of bounds. Each team may only hit the ball once before hitting it over the center line.

To begin, have one team serve the ball (similar to volleyball) by lobbing the ball underhanded across the center line toward the opposing team. After this initial serve, the ball must be kept in play using only the hips. A team scores a point when a player of the opposing team:

- misses the ball
- fails to return the ball
- knocks the ball out of bounds
- touches the ball with their hands or feet
- stops the ball before it reaches the center line.

It does not matter how many times the ball bounces.

When a team scores a point, the other team gains the serve. The team that first scores eight points wins.

**Closure:**

Have students briefly discuss the challenges posed by the ball handling rules and how they are similar to or different from other ball sports. How might a lack of rubber have affected the evolution of sport elsewhere in the world?

---

## ASSESSMENT:

Students should be evaluated on their level of participation, their work with their team, and their contributions to the class discussion.

---

## USEFUL LINKS:

Ballgame: this kid-friendly, interactive site includes a video reenactment of the Mesoamerican Ballgame. <http://mesoballgame.org/ballgame>

Ulama video: youtube video of the version of the Mesoamerican Ballgame still being played today in Sinaloa, Mexico. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=rReFhUtZzYc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rReFhUtZzYc)

Ulama: The Mazatlán Historical Society's information on Ulama. <http://www.ulama.freehomepage.com/index.html>

Rubber Balls: Museum Secrets youtube video - *Rubber Balls in Mexico: A Long History and a Mayan Tradition* [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_ZYpRsqfFg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_ZYpRsqfFg)

---

## COMMON CORE CONNECTIONS:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.6-8.2 Write informative/explanatory texts, including the narration of historical events, scientific procedures/ experiments, or technical processes.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.6-8.7 Conduct short research projects to answer a question, drawing on several sources and generating additional related, focused questions that allow for multiple avenues of exploration.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.6.1 Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 6 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.6.2 Interpret information presented in diverse media and formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) and explain how it contributes to a topic, text, or issue under study.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.6.4 Present claims and findings, sequencing ideas logically and using pertinent descriptions, facts, and details to accentuate main ideas or themes; use appropriate eye contact, adequate volume, and clear pronunciation.

---

**BASIC RULES**
**Set-up:**

- A medium sized kickball or volleyball.
- Two teams with 4-6 players each.

**Playing the game:**

- Server lobs the ball underhanded from behind the serve line into the opposing team's court. (First serve is determined by coin toss, each subsequent serve by the team that lost the last point.)
- One hit per side. (In advanced version of the game players must hit the ball in strict rotation.)
- It does not matter how many times the ball bounces, however if the ball comes to a stop, the ball is declared dead and the opposing team scores a point.
- A ball touching a boundary line is not out.

**Scoring:**

- A team scores a point when a player of the opposing team: misses the ball; fails to return the ball; knocks the ball out of bounds; touches the ball with their hands or feet; or stops the ball before it reaches the center line.
- The team that first scores eight points wins. (In the advanced version of the game, if at any time the score is tied, both teams scores go back to zero.)

**The court:**

Two Maya ballcourts can easily be laid out on a standard basket ball court.

