

The Ballplayer

By Alejandro Bravo

Translated by Richard V. McGehee

*... no time for losers, 'cause
we are the champions of the world*
Queen

My life is wrapped up in this ball. If my team wins we'll be covered with honors and placed on a level with the gods. If we lose we'll have only the contempt of our fellow citizens and the eternal recriminations of our families.

We've been playing since we left Tulum. We're the sons of poor country people who began playing for the fun of it, until somebody had the idea of pitting us against the young aristocrats in the ball court of the temple.

I had never been in the city except for the time I accompanied my parents to an important religious celebration. I was dazzled by the streets, the impressive form of the temples, the musical tinkling of water running in the canals, the vestments of the priests.

The day of that match we became important people. We played with spirit. We knew that if we defeated the sons of the upper-class citizens, we would be allowed to represent Tulum in the competitions of the League of the Sacred Mayan Ballgame. We struck the rubber sphere with our shoulders, elbows, knees, and hips, as the rules indicate, never using hands or feet; we moved like pumas within the court. Accustomed as we were to playing on grass and sand, the stone-floored patio allowed us to run after the ball with greater speed. That day the young aristocrats of Tulum bit the dust.

We stopped living in the palm shacks of the forest where our parents planted corn for their subsistence and worked in the cacao plantations of the rich, or in the quarries shaping rocks for repairs of the temples, or to construct new centers for ceremonies.

They lodged us in the complex of buildings constructed around the temple of Kukulcán. We were fed the best honey, venison and turkey, and tortillas of the purest whiteness. Under the direction of certain priests and warriors we underwent strenuous physical training, to make us the champion ballplayers of the entire Mayan world.

We were taken with great pomp to Uxlum and introduced to the priests as the team that would represent Tulum in the games of the League. They housed us in the basement of the palace of the priests of Ixchel. We were practically prisoners because the women who lived in the upper floors were virgins and had to keep being so in order to serve the goddess of childbirth and fertility.

They stuck us in that humid and foul-smelling place so we couldn't have any contact with the common people of the city. Their team was formed by upper-class youths like the ones we had defeated in our home town. We even had to conduct our practices at night, illuminated by great torches that blazed in the spaces that would later be occupied by spectators.

I didn't expect such bad treatment from the people of Uxlum. The rubber ball starts out being white, but with use, it becomes almost black. They gave us used balls for our practices. When the ball was launched by the opposing team, especially at the great velocities sometimes attained during the fiercest moments in the games, you almost couldn't see it.

We arrived at Uxlum in the driest part of summer, when fireflies invade the fields. I thought of an idea, to turn our bad treatment at the hands of the Uxlum priests into something good for us. I told my teammates to catch fireflies and place them in clay vessels in our rooms. After a large quantity of insects had been collected, we rubbed them on the ball. The result was a ball shining in the night with its own light, and we concentrated our eyes on the ball with greater precision.

The day of the game the highest level of Uxlum society was seated in the stands above the walls flanking the patio of play. The jade pectoral plates and bracelets of the most important citizens were dazzling. The sun was dazzling, the plastered walls were dazzling, even the noisy shouting of the masses was dazzling.

At that moment I understand the evil intentions of the leaders of Uxlum in their true magnitude. We would lose the game purely because of the brilliant light of the day. I remembered that the avenue down which we had paraded wearing the colors of our city had been wet. I checked the soles of my sandals and saw they had a layer of mud adhering to them. I took the mud and smeared it around my eyes as a protective barrier against the sun, and I told my teammates to do the same.

When the young aristocrats launched the ball and we responded, I realized the victory would be ours. Our opponents didn't have the agility, the sharp vision, or the muscular strength sufficient to take the ball from our side.

We returned to our city and they received us as if we were the defeated ones. In a great silence they closed us up in the basements of the palace of the priests of Itzamná. Then we realized that the leaders had not desired our victory. That our match with the aristocrats of Uxlum had been thought up as a means of ingratiating our city with them. Pulling the best of us athletes out of the forest, sons of poor workers, and placing us in competition with a well-trained group of young aristocrats. After creating great hopes, our defeat would serve as an example to quiet down any thoughts of uprising by the Yucatán country people. *“This bunch of shitheads had to be taught that if they couldn't defeat the upper-class citizens even in a sporting event, they had much less chance in the political arena.”*



Ballcourt at Copan. Photo by: Richard V. McGehee

They took us to Copán, far from the sea. We traveled over stone roads within a labyrinth of trees. Enormous vines hung from the trees, brilliantly colored guacamayas suddenly shrieked, and packs of monkeys noisily responded. Sometimes we ate and slept in little towns. Most of the time we just paused to eat and sleep on the road. They thought this would

weaken us and we would suffer a resounding beating at the hands of the youths of Copán. They didn't know that before leaving Tulum we had entrusted ourselves to the protection of Ek Chuah, the god of travelers and merchants. Every day before beginning our travel we rubbed our muscles with the grease of tapirs, and at the end of the day, before sleeping, in spite of our tremendous fatigue, we did gymnastic exercises. We made ourselves tougher.

Copán is a jewel in the middle of the forest. It's much larger than Tulum. Sculptures in high relief, such as we had never seen before, adorned the structures. Everything was colossal. As if it hadn't been erected by human hands but rather by the gods themselves.

Here they housed us in luxurious rooms in the Governor's Palace. I was introduced to steam baths and the delicious body massages given us by beautiful young girls. As guests of honor we attended ceremonies in honor of the god Xaman Ek, the polar star, and afterwards they gave us a sumptuous banquet.

I became suspicious that the people of Copán were trying to soften us up by means of these comforts. I spoke to my teammates about this, and we decided to increase our training. The day of the game the space surrounding the area of play was full of spectators. In the stands were priests, warriors, merchants, and other important people of the city. In the streets and other areas the masses of poor people congregated.

After the prayers offered to the gods, the team of Copán launched the ball. When we observed their clumsy movements, their sluggish feet, we toyed with them. We sent the sphere to those parts of the field of play where it was most difficult for them to return the pass to us. We saw them sweat, we felt



them suffer. Each masterful blow by our team

Ballcourt at Copan. Photo by: Richard V. McGehee

received as prize, an ovation from the masses. When I passed the ball through the ring attached to one of the walls, terminating the match with our victory, the country people invaded the ball court and carried us off on their shoulders. The leaders of Copán smothered us with gifts. On the return trip to our city we played and won in Labná and Chetumal.

During all the months I was shut up in temples and palaces, I taught myself to read the steles and codices. I discovered the concept of time and the cycle of eternal repetitions. *Tuns*, *katuns*, and *baktuns*. Cycles of 52 years, cycles of cycles, and cycles of thousands of years. Everything is born, grows, and dies. The dead is reborn, to grow again, and die all over again.

Then I read about the origins of the gods and the history of each one. I learned how the priests manage the temple, interpreting the *katuns*, reading the plans of the stars. To avoid the

bad times by sacrificing young women and warriors to the gods of adversity in order to placate the gods' evil intentions.

Thus when we returned to Tulum I could interpret the new stele that the priests erected at the entrance of the ceremonial complex. It began with what was called the long account. It told us how many *tuns* and *baktuns* had occurred since the creation of the people of clay and their destruction, then it told of the humans of wood who were stupid and bad people and were wiped out by a second flood. It told our history, the people of corn. It described the cycles of *Kulkán*, rotating in its orbit in space, the passage of comets near our world, the eclipses and floods, the history of past civilizations. Our daily life, the priest and the warrior, the prostitute of the town, the prisoner and the slave, the sacred *cenotes*, and the life of the market. The culminating point was the prophecy of the future. Death and destruction foretold the end of the *katún*. Unless the priests, who know everything, were successful in moving the god-stars and finding in the numbers the favorable combinations for avoiding the worst. If not, a new deluge would erase everything and a new humanity would have to be created by the gods.

We were taken to the most important temple. The priests offered honey, flowers, and aroma of copal to the father of all the gods, the creating spirit of everything, to Hunab Ku, the god who has no form, the creator of the Itzamná himself. Then they carried us to each of the temples in a solemn procession under a canopy of feathers and floral adornments, as if we were gods on earth.

They put us up in the Governor's Palace. Fine clothes were given us and also concubines for our relaxation. We became the people who used jade and gold breast adornments in their daily life. After a few days the governor called us into his presence. He was flanked by the leading warriors and the chief priests. He told us that the end of the *katún* was approaching. There were bad indications from the sky for our people. Droughts and destruction of cities, illnesses, and political disturbances. We athletes were the hope of all the Maya. If we won for Tulum all the matches of the League of the Sacred Ballgame, that would have great significance and perhaps could turn around the negative designs for the end of time. The children of the masses saving the people. The men of corn as redeemers of the corn fields. If we won in the sacred court of Chichén Itzá, the largest and most difficult in the world, we would be elevated to the category of gods and our families would become aristocrats. They wouldn't have to go on breaking their backs in long days of forced labor; they would no longer have to pay any tributes. They would live in luxurious rooms, like those we live in now, and they would drink foamy cacao. We all

listened, concentrating on the words of Halach Uinic, the priest-governor. We all assented, kneeling on one knee and striking the ground with our right fists.

I did the same as the others, but I didn't believe a single word the governor had said. First they had wanted to embarrass us in our own town of Tulum. Then they entered into agreements with the leaders of other cities to exhibit us like monkeys in a fair, exotic animals on market days. After not being able to beat us, they were changing tactics to demand a supreme sacrifice on our part. There was a good reason the governor was the voice of the *Cocom*, the militaristic family that, from Matapán, controlled the entire world. The people who had corrupted warriors and priests to exacerbate the exploitation of the masses, the *Cocom*, descendants of Hunasc Ceel, the traitor who turned over the best of our treasures to the Toltecs and initiated the era of human sacrifices. There couldn't be anything good behind the governor's words.

We continued training strenuously. We defeated Tikal. In Bonampak I contemplated the paintings that adorn the temples and make this city different from all the others of our world. I could see represented there the repression exercised by the warriors over uprising country people. In three adjacent rooms the history of the rebellion is narrated, then the battle and the defeat of the masses. Finally, in the fourth room of the mural, the prisoners are seen tied together in single file waiting, while the commander of the warriors orders their decapitation. Some of the prisoners beg for clemency, others gaze with horror at their mutilated fingers dripping blood. I discovered then that the rumors heard within the masses about rebellions of country people were true. Although I was wearing clothes of fine cotton and adornments of jade and gold, I didn't identify with the victors.

We visited the walled city of Mayapán and were received by the *Cocom* who governed at that time. The environment was uncomfortable. In all parts of the city there were warriors with their arms at the ready. Archers on the roof of the palace with vigilant attitudes. A banal luxury immersed the house of the rulers, the priests servile with the powerful. The *Cocom* was half drunk when he received us. He spoke a few stupidities and left to continue drinking with his adulators. We breathed with relief when we left that place.

The day of the match we saw that the captain of our opponents was the young *Cocom*. The area surrounding the court was invaded by warriors. The important people abjectly applauded each impulse their master gave the ball. We played nervously. I felt like the game lasted an

eternity. When the ball passed through the ring indicating our victory, I expected the worst from the archers, ostensibly there to provide security for the spectators.

They loaded us with gifts and assigned us the task of submitting a message written on a long strip of deerskin, from the *Cocom* of Mayapán to the chief of Palenque. It told of new negative predictions that the priests had seen in the heavens. It requested young women and men for sacrifices in the sacred *cenote* of Mayapán.

When we arrived at Palenque we were startled by the magnificent structures. Neither Copán nor Uxmal could rival this city. The principal temple of Tikal wasn't as splendid as the pyramid of Palenque; nothing could be compared with the sculptures in relief in the columns of the palace, nothing was like their treatment of the human figure. They received us like semi-gods. We turned over the message from the *Cocom* to the chief of Palenque. We were housed in a complete wing of the palace. Young slave girls danced for us and warmed our beds. This city, along with Mayapán and Chichén Itzá, had controlled the Mayan world until the first *Cocom* had allied himself with the Toltecs in order to establish his dominance.

We played scientifically and with spirit. We won, acclaimed by the crowd and praised by the aristocrats. One game separated us from the final triumph. The great ball court of Chichén Itzá. The aristocrats of Palenque prepared us for the trip. First, fasting and meditation. Then steam baths to eliminate impurities and a balanced diet. Total sexual abstinence and hard training. We would be playing against a team selected from the best players of each city. A team of stars, a priest told us.

A crowd gave us a great send-off when we left for Chichén Itzá. As if we were the aristocrats of some city or important priests. We entered by the Plaza of the Hundred Columns; in front of the market; and were conducted to the principal temple. From the top of the pyramid we could view all the city. To the west we saw the ball court, the largest in the world. The steam baths to the south, where the pilgrims purify themselves when they come from great distances to venerate the Kukulkán in the Temple of the Bearded Man or those who seek the blessing of Chaac Mool for their crops, and dance ancient dances for rain, and the adorers of death who prostrate themselves before the platform of skulls near the ball court and implore Ah Puc, their god, to be benevolent with them in the afterlife. We contemplated the avenue that leads to the sacred *cenote* to the south—and to the north, the avenue of the observatory.

The day of the match was determined by the priests after carefully observing the stars. We were not allowed to practice in the ball court of the city. We used another, near the observatory.

Today they fed us fruits and honey in the early hours of the morning. We marched through the entire city amidst great splendor. Our procession left the observatory and continued to the ball court. At the front of our entourage marched second-level chiefs, decorated with a profusion of quetzal feathers and chest adornments carved of jade with incrustations of gold. The people applauded us as we passed. We arrived at the ball court. The Halach Uinic of the city announced that this match would conclude the League of Sacred Pelota that was celebrated each *katún*. The end of this time cycle could bring great tragedies for the Mayan people. But the victory of the team of the common people, coming from Tulum, could turn back the negative predictions the priests had seen written in the stars. Let the game begin. And he gave the signal.



One of a series of murals from the South Ballcourt at El Tajín, showing the sacrifice of a ballplayer. Photo by Thomas Aleto. CC BY 2.0

I make the first shot, and I know that as this ball goes, so goes my life. When I received it from the chief of Chichén Itzá and I contemplated the bas-relief that adorns the wall where he is seated, I could see the fate of the victors. Separated by an enormous ball enclosing a skull are the two groups of players. The chief of the defeated team is decapitating the captain of the victorious team.

My parents will hate me, and I'll be a pariah in my world. Maybe I'll have to immigrate to Aztec lands and become a merchant. I'm not going to donate my life so the principal leaders can continue screwing the poor masses. If the world has to collapse, let it collapse, and let the gods of the nine lower regions consume the *Cocom's* for all eternity. With this shot I'm going to place the ball in a position that will be easy for a member of the other team to pass it through the ring of victory. Before converting myself into a pariah, I, Kukupacal from Tulum, I'll have the pleasure of decapitating one of them.