

Translator's Note

El Jugador de Pelota [The Ballplayer] was included in “Cuentos Nicaragüenses” (Julio Valle-Castillo, Ed.; Managua: Centro Nicaragüense de Escritores, 2002) and also in Alejandro Bravo's short story collection, “Baile con el Diablo,” which won one of two honorable mentions in the 2010 competition for the María Teresa Sánchez literary prize conducted as part of the Banco Central de Nicaragua's 50th anniversary celebration. Later in 2010 Bravo's collection was published in Managua by the Fondo NORAD-Centro Nicaragüense de Escritores-Unión de Escritores de Noruega.

The Maya Ball Game (Mesoamerican Ball Game) was thought to be more of a religious ritual than sport in the modern sense. It probably existed throughout roughly 500-1500 A.D. Ball courts existed in many Maya temple complexes located from southern Mexico to Honduras and El Salvador. The courts typically had floors and walls of stone and generally were laid out in the form of a block letter I, but there were many variations in their size and design of the walls. Side walls typically were vertical or nearly so in the bottom few feet, followed by a gentle to steep longer segment, with another vertical part at the top. In some courts the top portions bore large stone rings placed in vertical position at the midpoint of each of the side walls. For the courts with rings, the objective is thought to have been to pass the ball through the ring. The ball was relatively large, maybe similar to volleyball size, and made of the rubber which is native to the Mid-America region. Interpretation of how the game was played is still open to investigation, but apparently two multi-player teams competed against each other. They could not use their hands to move the ball, and ceramic figurines from the period show ballplayers with padding of elbows, knees, heads, and especially, hips, which apparently were the main means of propelling the ball. Another controversy about the game involves those competitions in which one of the players was sacrificed at the end of the match. It is not clear whether this player was the captain of the winning or the losing team or someone else. However, some bas-relief sculptures distinctly show a ballplayer being decapitated by a priest using a stone knife, and many ancient Maya texts talk about ball play and sacrifices.

The Mesoamerican ball game was also played north of the Maya region, well into central Mexico, as far as the northwestern Mexican state of Sinaloa, where a version of the game is still played today, and even into the U.S. state of Arizona. There is considerable published research related to the Mesoamerican game. An extensive source of information is “The Mesoamerican

Ballgame” Vernon L. Scarborough and David R. Wilcox, Eds. Tucson, AZ: The University of Arizona Press, 1991.

Bravo maintains some elements of the traditional game but adds many fanciful ideas, such as league competition and a “super bowl” championship at the end of the “season.” All of the sites he mentions were actual Maya temple cities (with the exception of Uxlum, which probably refers to Uxmal). A couple of small physical discrepancies involve Copán, where the narrator talks of stone rings (there are no rings in the reconstructed court today), and Chichén Itzá, where he describes the court as much larger than its presently reconstructed dimensions (in the translation I use the present dimensions).