

# Masculinity and Power in the Ancient Mesoamerican Ballgame

*“Sport...is a perpetual creation of the men who  
practice and organize it, and who are,  
in turn, transformed by their very creation.”  
--Georges Magnane*

Sports and manhood are linked irrevocably in the minds of contemporary American men. Our preoccupation with football, baseball, basketball, and a variety of other more or less violent sports has become so pervasive that we expect athletic success to carry over into all other realms of a man's life. Modern American culture seems to deify professional athletes, and when given the opportunity to study this phenomenon in detail, I began to wonder where it had come from and what deeper messages lay behind it. I wanted to know if this same man/athlete identification would work in a situation as removed from my own experience as that of the ancient Maya. What I found, in the end, wasn't surprising. They associated maleness with athleticism in the same way that many other cultures do. Maleness often means dominance, conquest, and even the total destruction of rivals. The culture-specific means by which this association was maintained in ancient Mesoamerica lay in the ballgame. It was a game full of myth and symbolism, but one that nonetheless made the public demonstration of violence a necessary part of masculinity.

The ballgame lay at the center of Mayan culture. It was commonly played in teams, and the hierarchy of the team probably mimicked the hierarchy of real life (Schele 1993: 368). The king always played a special role. He was the focus of the game while the rest of the royal family supported him. Sites all across ancient Mesoamerica are rich with ballgame images and carvings. Social elites loved playing ball and loved remembering their victories, and as we will see, used those memories in a variety of important metaphorical ways.

The rules of the game were simple. The players, who were usually a group of nobles competing against their war captives, had to bounce a rubber ball off angled benches on either side of the playing alley. They could not allow the ball to touch the ground, and scored points by hitting special markers at mid-court. They hit the ball with their hips and sides, or sometimes with a special piece of equipment called a yoke. The ball was slightly larger and heavier than a basketball (Schele 1993: 341).

Equipment for the game was cumbersome, but it protected players from the impact of the ball. They wore cotton padding around their pelvises to support the weight of the yoke. Their forearms were also protected with thick cotton padding. Only one knee was protected with a kneepad. They wore calf-length leather skirts over their loincloths that probably prevented scrapes. Headdresses and other symbols were worn on the body as well (Schele 1993: 343).

The ball court was a metaphorical space rich with meaning. Architects almost always situated ball courts between public ritual areas and elite residences, because the “ball court and ball game played a role in mediating between the mundane and the supernatural (Joyce 1991: 123).” The simple athletic competition of the game also went hand in hand with meanings related to religion, ideology, and politics. When the ancient Mayans played the ballgame they “assumed the roles of cosmic beings, elevating their play to the level of a great cosmic drama (Schele 1993: 343).” In this way they brought ancestors and living descendants together in the same physical space.

On a religious level the ball game re-enacted the myth of the Hero Twins. In this story a pair of twins avenge the death of their father, named the First Father or Maize God, through trickery and quick thinking. The Lords of Death (who symbolize death,

disease, and fear) repeatedly challenge them to play the ball game. Every day the competition ends in a tie. Tragically the Twins won't be allowed to leave the Otherworld until a victor has been decided, so after each tie they're forced to endure another torturous night as guests of the evil Lords. Finally they defeat the Lords through a trick involving the substitution of the ball for a rabbit. Enraged, the Lords concede defeat, and later die at the hands of the Twins.

The ball game has complex metaphorical meanings. In one sense it was symbolic of defying death's finality (Schele 1993: 350). The Hero Twins had outwitted the cosmic forces arrayed against them, and the ballplayers would be expected to do the same in real life political situations. By winning the game they demonstrated their ability to overcome difficult odds. General themes involving team competition, roles of specific players, winning and losing bets, and the consequences of defeat all played into a general metaphorical framework for ballgame meaning (Schele 1993: 348). In the end the game stood for life itself and the quest to gain power, and that is the essence of the metaphor.

Ancient Mesoamericans believed that their ball courts "opened into the Otherworld (Schele 1993: 350)." Every court was the first step on a road in the sky that we would recognize as the Milky Way. That road led to the Otherworld. Each court was a portal through which players had access to a special primeval time and space, the space of creation. Some scholars have even likened images on the sides of ball courts to glass-bottom boats or windows (Miller 1998). There is a sense of cosmic reality just barely contained or just beneath the surface of these architectural constructions. In that way the ball players were situated within a special magical space where they were themselves and

not themselves simultaneously. They were themselves in a kingly capacity, but they were also not themselves because they temporarily embodied the Hero Twins.

In the realm of the Otherworld lived an assortment of important mythical figures. Most important was the First Father, whom the Twins avenged by defeating the Lords of Death (Chase 1992: 107). The First Father represented fertility and productivity to the ancient Mesoamericans. In order to understand how, we must return briefly to the story of his defeat in the Underworld. He too had played the ball game against the Lords of Death, but they tricked him and he lost. After his death he was decapitated, and his head was hung in a tree. A beautiful woman walked by, and from his tree he spit in her hand. This resulted in her impregnation and the subsequent birth of the Twins. When they defeated the Lords of Death, the Twins tried to bring him back to life. For some reason he was unable to name all of his own body parts and the Twins were unsuccessful. Instead they left him in the ball court to watch over the rest of his descendants (Schele 1993: 345).

The First Father plays an important part in the function of the ball court, which mediates mundane reality and the much more important Otherworldly reality. There is something very important going on here, a psychological process that is uniquely masculine, because it is unique to the role of the father. According to Warren Steinberg, a disciple of psychologist Carl Jung,

the father, as the natural “other,” belongs to the new and exciting nonmother world. He helps the child to differentiate from the mother by representing the world that the child is entering when the child, as part of a normal developmental sequence, separates from the merged relationship with the mother. If the father is receptive and supportive as the child moves away from the mother, the world will seem like a safer place. The father offers the child a stable place in which to practice independence and

separateness. *The very concept of reality is represented by the father, that is, reality experienced as an external force* (Steinberg 1993: 67, emphasis added).

In other words, our fathers are charged with introducing us to a new, in this case metaphorical, reality. The Mayan nobles recognized how important Fathers were to mediating this Otherworldly system of symbols and codes. A couple of obvious things show the exact magnitude of this connection. For example, First Father was supposedly buried in every ball court floor and his face was part of the hieroglyph for ball playing (Schele 1993). There is even one painting of Bird-Jaguar, a famous king, playing ball with his father and grandfather as supporting players (Schele 1993: 360). Fathers were the sources of power, since kingship was passed down through patriline, and elite men understood how Otherworld symbols pertained to power and masculinity. They were members of a socioeconomic and political elite that used the ballgame as a method for transmitting important symbolic information. The First Father's presence in the floor of every ball court confirmed the role of the father as mediator to a symbolic reality.

To the majority of people, masculinity is equated with self-worth, power, victory, and competence (Steinberg 1993: 138). A good man has the Midas touch; everything he does meets with success. Or at least that's what he thinks. This pattern repeats itself in culture after culture, and we can safely assume that the ancient Mesoamerican cultures were no exception. The images that have been preserved from them are not surprising by our current standards for masculinity. Men are shown engaged in warfare, capturing prisoners, hunting, engaged in ritual dance, and receiving visitors in a leadership capacity (Joyce 2000: 70). Ancient Mesoamerica's basic framework for manhood would probably seem familiar to us, although very little direct archaeological research has been published

to verify that fact directly. We can only assume from surviving images that it must be true. For the purposes of analysis, then, this paper will rely principally on current masculinity research for understanding antiquity. We can only assume that the analogy holds.

It has been said that “the accumulation of power is one of the defining characteristics of the masculine persona” (Steinberg 1993: 136). Scholars often define power as a capacity to change other people’s behavior, and from Mark Antony to JFK that principle has been demonstrated time and time again. Each of these figures commanded the attention and obedience (not necessarily unwilling) of thousands of others. They have been remembered in history as true men, and members of a selective pantheon to which normal men seldom gain access. Part of their mystique, as well, lies in their sexual prowess, because their reproductive power and sexual exploits mirror the power they command in social and political spheres. Cleopatra and Marilyn Monroe were certainly important trophies for powerful men. Powerful men get what they want.

Mayan kings were very much interested in symbolic demonstrations of power. They regularly commissioned stelae to record their conquests and kingdoms. These stelae would record feats of conquest, and took huge amounts of stone and talent to create. They were probably expensive. A lot of Mayan imagery-- on stelae for example-- shows nobility who are identifiable by their serenity, attire, size and placement in the scene, and by the artifacts that they carry (Chase 1992: 228). Since kingdom conquest was a regular feature of Mayan political life, military leadership was an important part of being in command. There were plenty of opportunities to demonstrate military aptitude. Rulers

wanted to be remembered as powerful and confident leaders, because probably they would have had well established track records. They were men in the public eye.

One of the most politically direct and temporally immediate goals of the ballgame was defense of one's honor in a public setting. Players fought for respect. This same situation was replicated in 18th century Europe in the form of sword duels. R.W. Connell says that

...at the intersection between [a] direct involvement in violence and the ethic of family honor was the institution of the duel. Willingness to face an opponent in the potentially lethal one-to-one combat was a key test of gentry masculinity (Connell 1995: 190).

Although time and space obviously separate this example from the Mesoamerican ballgame, there are still some valuable analogous connections here. The Mesoamericans were as interested in family as the European aristocracy. That has certainly been demonstrated by the First Father's role in the ballgame. More importantly, though, their honor as men was at stake too. They were public figures who would have had an image to maintain. They had to be powerful and in control, because anything less than that would call their leadership into question. They needed to periodically defend and display their honor.

In other words, men had a public self that they maintained through playing ball. They were required to do so by the expectations of history and the public. Jeff Hearn helps shed some light on this subject when he says that

To see public men as selves is to refer to two, usually distinct, phenomena: the *general* category of the 'public self' of men in the public domain; and the *particular* 'public selves' of particular men. The former refers to the production of some generalized notion of typical, characteristic, preferred, or ideal public selves of men in the public domains, without any necessary reference to particular individuals... [on the other hand] particular 'public

selves' refer to the public selves of particular men (Hearn 1992: 210, original emphasis).

On the one hand men in the public eye are expected to act in a specific way. They must fit certain (for lack of a better word) stereotypes of the archetypal male. In Mesoamerican society public men were expected to win wars and then play the ballgame against their captives. On the other hand, public men are each unique, with unique achievements.

So perhaps the ballgame had a twofold purpose. First it was a way by which men could adhere to ancient Mesoamerican ideas about powerful men. They assured the public of their leadership capabilities. As we already know, men as leaders are considered powerful, successful, and victorious. The ballgame was a way to prove those aspects of masculinity and then apply them to the *general* category of "public self." Ideal kings won wars, took a lot of captives, and then ritually sacrificed those captives. They successfully carried out wars and won them. In short, they were honorable.

Ballgames were a useful way to show the *particular* public selves of men as well. Each ball competition arose out of a specific and immediate conquest, wherein a king used his own particular military talents to expand his kingdom and subdue his time-specific enemies. The captives he sacrificed were available because of his own specific achievement. He had his own style of playing the game and his own style of leadership. In many ways he was probably unlike the kings who had come before him.

Two meanings were superimposed on an individual ballgame, then. On the first and more metaphorical level, leaders joined the ranks of the Hero Twins, the ideal men. The Hero Twins and every other male king were expected to play *and win* the game, so by participating in this metaphorical framework men confirmed their masculinity and

maintained their general public self, since every elite man before them had done the same. On a deeper level, the ball games were celebrations of specific achievement, which would contribute to a man's particular public self as well. He confirmed his entitlement to the throne within a very specific historical context.

Mayan males lived in a patriarchal culture, and that's part of the reason they were so interested in self-aggrandizement and the defense of honor. They were in competition with one another. According to Michael Messner, patriarchy includes intermale dominance. A minority of men must dominate the masses of men (Messner 1994: 86). Not only did the elites dominate the common men, but within the elites there was competition as well. They wanted to adhere as closely as possible to the general public's idea of masculinity. In essence, they fought to be more manly than the next guy.

It makes sense that competition would arise in an arena as purely physical as the ballgame. Males are accustomed to thinking of their bodies as weapons (Messner 1994: 90). According to many studies, aggression is a natural part of the male sex (Konner 2002: 95). The competition that's most useful in proving manhood is competition that happens on terms that are inherently male.

In masculine sports, the body is a weapon for domination, which makes it both a medium of and target for violence (McKay 2000: 89). Obviously players needed equipment for protection from physical damage. Any harm caused a king was probably seen as damage done by his opponent. He had to make frequent dives for the ball, which could easily result in scrapes and broken skin. There is something inherently masculine about that. As Messner says, "to endure pain is courageous, to survive pain is manly (Messner 1994: 86). We talk about "machismo" often. Macho people take things to

extremes; they think of gender as a continuum with extreme forms of masculinity and femininity on either end (McKay 2000: 91). The ballgame would seem appealing to those interested in expressing their masculinity in a macho way. They would want to engage in “ultra-” or “hyper-” masculine activities. The end result of a losing game, after all, was usually death.

Every important ball competition ended in the loss of a human life. When the First Father lost his competition to the Lords of Death he was promptly decapitated. Ancient Mesoamericans maintained the metaphor by decapitating their losers as well. Scenes of ritual decapitation are abundant in Mesoamerican art. Chichen Itza, Aparicio, El Tajín, and many others show captives who have just been decapitated. Some sites even included skull racks, where the skulls of recently decapitated prisoners were stored as trophies (Koontz 2001: 235).

In a religious sense the ballgame sacrifice enhanced agricultural fertility and prosperity (Koontz 2001: 235). The First Father, also called Maize God, was responsible for the success or failure of corn crops. The cornstalk, male tassel, and foliage of a mature corn plant were thought to embody him. Ballplaying was so intertwined with him that his portrait was incorporated into the hieroglyphic sign for ballplayer and ball playing (Gustafson 2002: 172). He symbolized agricultural fertility, and by allowing the blood of their enemies to flow, they evoked his power.

Iconography closely associates the First Father with a beast called the Waterlily Monster. This Waterlily Monster symbolized connections that existed between ballgames and captive sacrifice following major wars. In fact, the Waterlily Monster is the seed out of which the World Tree grows, and the ancient Mayan word for “large fruit-seed” also

meant “captive” or “skull” (Chase 1992: 108). The World Tree apparently grows from seeds that are the skulls of captives.

Kings depended upon sacrifice to validate their claims to the throne. Leadership developed along patrilineal lines, but a king could not claim the throne until he had performed a dedication ritual. He needed sacrificial victims for this purpose (Chase 1992: 100), and they were usually killed by decapitation (Wilkerson 1979: 117). To recognize the importance of sacrifice, Mayans often put a skull at the core of the ballgame’s rubber ball (Schele 1986: 249). The Waterlily Monster skull/seed metaphor also applies here. The Hero Twins gained their greatness through the loss of their father, but redeemed him by defeating his enemies. Kingship thus grows out of a seed of sacrifice, metaphorically the sacrifice of the First Father, but even more directly out of the very skull that had been separated from an enemy’s body. The skull itself was an important part of this system. As we noted before, the word for “seed” was the same as the word for “skull” and “captive.” Rulership literally grew out of the defeated man’s head. The victor had proven, and enhanced, the power that gave him rights to rule.

I have established that one cannot be masculine without power. Kings demonstrated their power through the violence and subordination bestowed upon their captives. It has been said that “because personal power is often equated with physical dominance, violence is one method by which men assert themselves over other people”(Steinberg 1993:136). The ballgame sacrifices helped men assert their dominance over others. By humiliating and then killing their enemies they placed themselves at the top of the hierarchy.

One of the most important parts of winning the ballgame was humiliating one's opponent. In order to maintain rule, a king would have to capture and humiliate his enemy (Schele 1986: 220). Ball courts all over Mesoamerica demonstrate this principle. At Tonina, in Chiapas, Mexico, the ballcourt seems deliberately constructed to commemorate the humiliation of enemies (Houston 1998: 213). Markers at this site (which players needed to hit to score points) were sculpted in the shape of captive bodies. Over time they disintegrated, and appear to have been re-sculpted into the shape of human phalluses, "to be repeatedly battered and attacked by human players (Houston 1998: 213)." The symbolic assault on captives' masculinity seems very direct and obvious here. The potency of the captive's genitalia (since the captor would undoubtedly win) was being called into question as his efforts to defend them were repeatedly denied.

The imagery of ball courts always emphasizes some aspect of the loser's humiliation. Sponsors of that imagery must have wanted to emphasize it for some reason, and of course those sponsors were the victors themselves. There were specific conventions that dictated how the artist depicted captives' humiliation. The captive was always shown

nude or nearly so (a particularly humiliating situation for the elite, who normally were burdened with layers of beautifully woven fabrics and elaborate feather garments), with his arms bound behind his back with rope. Instead of the serene faces that nobles displayed, captives were shown with grimaces; instead of the formal postures of victorious elite, captives were shown in unnatural, awkward, and contorted body positions (Chase 1992: 228).

Not only did kings want to humiliate their opponents at the moment of the contest, they also wanted to be commemorated as having done so in a permanent way. I suggest that their manhood depended upon it. They intended to subordinate captives by humiliating

them, and by subordinating them they established themselves in positions at the very top of a tall hierarchical pyramid.

Some define hegemonic masculinity as “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees... the dominant position of men and the subordination of women (Connell 1995: 77).” Hegemonic masculinity motivated men to play the ballgame because it guaranteed them a privileged spot in the patriarchy. Here is how: victors placed humiliated captives in an inferior position. When they did this, they gave manhood a positive connotation since manhood was equated with ball playing and victory. This zero-sum value, and by extension this system, put some people higher and some people lower on the totem pole. Weak men and women were excluded from access to power, and the hegemonic system remained in place.

It follows that ballgames absolutely had to be public. There had to be an open and universally observed maintenance of masculine hegemonic values. Anthony Quinton asserts that humiliation must always happen in the public eye. Without the actual or implied presence of other people, things simply aren't humiliating (Quinton 1997: 80). In fact archaeologists have found that most ball courts are positioned so to be seen by large crowds, thereby confirming this assertion (Schele 1986: 247).

In the final analysis, Mesoamerican ballplayers sought three things: recognition and transmission of patriarchal information, maintenance of hegemonic masculine values, and a very real quantification of one man's dominance over another. The myth of the First Father reminded elite ballplayers about revenge, defiance of death, and overcoming obstacles of a nearly supernatural magnitude. They sought to maintain their hegemonic

position by making themselves the exclusive curators of these symbols, since no other member of society was granted the right to play. Also the system helped them assign a point system to gender, which assured the maintenance of hegemonic masculine values, and guaranteed them a position at the top. Finally, the game was a very real and very direct demonstration of personal manhood. Contemporary sports seem aimed at very similar goals, but as our common understanding of gender progresses towards more equality for all gender expressions, the nature of sport will probably change right along with it.

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