STUDENTS OF THE GAME

When the Aztec and Maya played it 500 to 1,000 years ago, the losers sometimes lost their heads—literally. Today scholars are visiting remote Mexican villages to study the oldest sport in the Americas, *ulama*, now on the verge of extinction.

*By John Fox*

“¡DÉFAMELO!” Jesús “Chuy” Páez shouts. “Leave it for me!” The nine-pound black rubber ball arcs high in the late-afternoon Mexican sky. Páez’ s teammates scatter, fanning out diagonally to defend their end zone. With a running leap, Páez throws his deerskin-padded hip into the ball, connecting with a punishing thud and launching the ball fast and low across the hard-packed dirt court’s centerline.

“Your turn, old man!” Páez says as Fito Lizárraga, a youthful 56-year-old, prepares to return the ball. Bracing himself on the ground with one hand, Lizárraga pivots his hip to strike the ball low and sends it skidding back through the dirt. Lizárraga’s teammates close in fast behind him as players from both teams take turns flinging themselves to the ground, and the ball ricochets between hips like an oversize pinball. Then, with a dive worthy of New York Yankees shortstop Derek Jeter, Páez knocks the ball past Lizárraga and his teammates, sending it crashing into a chain-link fence at the end of the court.

On the sidelines, the 30 or so Los Llanitos hometown spectators erupt in cheers—a point scored in another Sunday afternoon pickup game of America’s oldest sport, *ulama* (from the Aztec’s word for it, *ullamaliztli*). Archaeologists say that communities from the jungles of Honduras to the deserts of northern Mexico have been playing versions of it for the past 3,500 years. Against all odds, this ancient game survived the rise and fall of the Olmec, Maya and Aztec civilizations, not to mention the devastation wrought by the Spanish Conquest.

Yet today ulama faces extinction. The players’ relative poverty and geographic isolation, a lack of natural rubber and competition from newer sports such as volleyball and baseball have driven it to the brink. The threat has brought together an odd coalition of academics, athletes and local businessmen trying to preserve it and study it for clues to how the ancient Mesoamericans lived.

TWO PROFESSORS at California State University at Los Angeles—archaeologist James Brady and art historian Manuel Aguilar—together with their students, form the Ulama Project. They seem unlikely sports fans. “For years, we archaeologists were stuck in a major rut,” says Brady “We’d go out, dig up an ancient ball court, date it and publish an article about it. But we rarely learned anything interesting or new about the game.” Brady and Sergio Garza, his graduate student at the University of California at Riverside, specialize in ancient Maya caves; even by day they sport flashlights on their belts, as if a dark, unexplored crevice might present itself at any moment. For Brady, ulama represents an opportunity to conduct what’s called ethnoarchaeology; by studying the modern game, he and his colleagues hope to better understand its past. “For so long,” he says, “archaeology had ball courts without people in them. By recording the game as it’s played today, we’re putting the sport, the enjoyment and the competition back into the ball court.”

THE HOUR-AND-A-HALF DRIVE from the beach resort of Mazatlán to Los Llanitos (pop. 151) begins on a jammed coastal highway lined with fast-food joints and high-rise hotels and ends

“Students of the Game” by John Fox from SMITHSONIAN, April 2006. Reprinted by permission of John Fox.
on a bone-jarring dirt road winding through with-ered cornfields. Just past a church and a corral packed with cattle, Brady, Garza and I pull up to the tin-roofed home of 28-year-old farmer Chuy Páez. Tan, trim and wearing buffed cowboy boots and a large silver belt buckle, Páez steps over a dog sleeping in the shade of the porch and extends a hearty welcome.

Inside his concrete-floor bedroom is Páez’s personal Wall of Fame. In one photograph, he’s captured in midair, arms out and hip thrust forward, just seconds after striking the ball. In another, Páez’s 11-year-old son, Chuyito, poses proudly in his deerskin loincloth, holding a ball that looks to be nearly half his size. As we tour the gallery, Páez reaches up into the rafters and unties a rubber ball from a hanging neckerchief. Then, leading us back outside, he positions me in one corner of the porch and walks ten feet to the opposite corner.

“¿Listo?” he asks with a grin. “Ready?” I nod tentatively. He bounces the ball—a little smaller than a bowling ball—across the patio floor. As I reach out to catch it, the nine-pound spheroid smashes through my hands and into my chest, almost knocking me to the ground. Brady laughs, having warned me of the weight. “See what I mean?”

For Brady, as for me, just absorbing the ball’s impact for the first time was a revelation. Sure, he’d read in the writings of Diego Durán, a 16th-century Spanish friar, of the physical abuse endured by Aztec ballplayers, who “got their haunches so mangled that they had those places cut with a small knife and extracted blood which the blows of the ball had gathered.” And though I’d written a 300-page doctoral dissertation on ulama, I had never before felt the blow of a ball against my hip. “It’s one of those things you can read about all you want,” says Brady, “but until you feel it for yourself and have the bruise to show for it, it’s meaningless.”

Sixteenth-century Spanish chroniclers of the New World, most of them Franciscan friars bent on spreading the Christian faith, described with awe their first encounters with this peculiar sport, played with a solid ball that appeared to have magical properties. Hernando Cortés was so impressed with the game that he brought a team of players back to Spain in 1528 to perform in the royal court. But the friars soon learned that for the Aztec and other Mesoamericans, *ullamaliztli* was as much religious rite as sandlot sport. In their codices, or sacred books, the Aztec compared the bouncing ball to the cosmic journey of the sun into and out of the underworld. Highly ritualized ballgames enacted at key religious festivals helped to ensure the continuous cycles of nature and the cosmos. Ball courts in Tenochtitlán, the Aztec capital (in what is now Mexico City), were adorned with sculptures depicting local gods and other supernatural beings. Priests initiated important games with offerings of incense in nearby temples.

At least some of the games saw human sacrifice. The losing players—or unlucky stand-ins captured in battle—could literally lose their heads in post-game ceremonies. In one graphic depiction on the walls of the monumental ninth-century Maya ball court at Chichén Itzá in the Yucatan, serpents and squash plants sprout from the neck of a kneeling, decapitated player, bestowing fertility on the land and the living. A rival player wields a stone knife and the freshly severed head as his grisly trophy.

In 1585, the Spanish, citing such practices, banned the ballgames. But in remote frontier vil-

ages, *ullama* survived. “When the Spanish friars drove the game underground,” Aguilar says, “it almost certainly lost most of its religious over-
tones.” But some intriguing practices seem to hint at a residual link to ancient beliefs. According to Spanish accounts, for example, the Aztec played primarily on religious feast days; today in Los Llanitos, the game is played on Christian holidays. And while the ancient ball courts were often next to pyramid temples, today’s *tastes* tend to be located next to village cemeteries.

Not that the game was ever entirely spiritual. In an early account of the sport’s dark side, chronicler Diego Durán describes how some players “gambled their homes, their fields, their corn gran-
aries, their maguey plants. They sold their children in order to bet and even staked themselves and...
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became slaves, to be sacrificed later if they were not ransomed.”

THE LOS LLANITOS taste hardly suggests the grandeur of its ancient precursors; it is a long, narrow alley of hard-packed clay lined with palm trees, about 12 feet wide and the length of roughly half a football field. At two o’clock on a Sunday, the first of eight players arrives. He is soon joined by others in a corner of the court that serves as a makeshift locker room. They strip to their underwear and put on fajados, four-piece leather-and-cloth girdles that protect the stomach, hips and buttocks. As the players take to the field to warm up, spectators stake out the best, and safest, spots—mostly in the end zones, the better to avoid a hurtling ball, which travels upwards of 30 miles per hour. Young boys, wearing fajados and the occasional baseball cap, imitate the players on the sidelines, while toddlers play safely behind the chain-link fence.

The game begins when a team of three to five players throws the ball high (male por arriba) or rolls it low (male por abajo) across a chalk-marked centerline. Play continues back and forth, with contestants using only their hips to strike the ball, until a point (raya) is scored when a team fails to return the ball, as in tennis, or when the ball is driven past the opponent’s end zone, as in football. The first team to total eight rayas wins, though due to a complex scoring system that not only awards points but also takes them away, games can go on for hours or even, when halted by nightfall, days.

For Brady and his colleagues, what began as a purely academic study has turned into an all-out effort to save one of the Americas’ oldest traditions. The pair recently petitioned the Mexican Ministry of Tourism, without success, to nominate ulama for UNESCO recognition, to attract more interest and support. But in the end, ulama’s survival may hinge on something far more pedestrian: the availability of rubber balls.

At one time, during the Aztec Empire, the southern Gulf Coast of Mexico was the heartland of rubber production. But since then, the rubber trees that once grew there have been wiped out by development, and the people of Los Llanitos and nearby communities have to travel hundreds of miles into Durango, a region increasingly under the control of Mexican drug lords, to find rubber trees to milk. As a result, the price of a single ulama ball has reached a staggering $1,000, or about $250 more than the annual income of the average Los Llanitos player. The town has only one playable ball—and regular use is shrinking it.

Mazatlán businessman Jesús Gómez, a longtime supporter of the game, has taken the lead in the search for an artificial substitute, and the Ulama Project’s scholars have teamed up with members of the Mazatlán Historical Society to experiment with commercial latex from as far away as New York City. “If we can’t get natural rubber,” says Gómez, “we need to find another way. Otherwise, ulama will not survive. It’s that simple.”

So far, artificial rubber has failed to replicate the look, feel and, most important, remarkable bouncing properties of traditional balls. “Look at this,” says Páez after the game at Los Llanitos. He drops a lumpy white blob of low-grade latex rubber, the result of Jesús Gómez’s latest experiments, and watches it bounce erratically off his patio. “This doesn’t work,” he says with visible disgust. “It’s not natural rubber.” But the researchers have not given up. In La Savila, a neighboring village, Aguilar says players are field-testing a ball made of another artificial compound, and he remains optimistic that a substitute may soon be found.

After rubber balls, what ulama may need more than anything is followers. Although players have been invited to resorts in the Yucatan to perform for tourists in faux-Maya extravaganzas—complete with drums, feather headdresses and face paint—most decline, regarding the displays as exploitative and culturally inaccurate. For Páez and his teammates, ulama is a living sport that tourists should appreciate on its own terms, not a curiosity. Aguilar and his colleagues are working to convince Spanish-language television networks to sponsor a tour that would bring ulama to the streets of Los Angeles and other Latino population centers in the United States. Perhaps here, in a nation increasingly proud of its Latino roots, the oldest sport in the Americas will find the fans sufficient to carry it through another millennium or two.

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