

BALL COURTS

One of the most intriguing features found at Wupatki Pueblo is the ball court. First identified as such in the early 1930's, the ball court was excavated and reconstructed in 1965-1966. Although it is one of many ball courts in Arizona, it is one of the most northerly and the only one with masonry walls which has been excavated.

Exactly what type of game did the Indians of Wupatki play in the ball court? Unfortunately we do not have a definite answer. The people of Wupatki left no written records and no petroglyphs or pictographs depicting the game, and the Hopi Indians, from whom we draw much of our information, have no tradition of a ball game played in a court. However, we can speculate on what it may have been like by examining the ball games played by the Aztec and Mayan cultures of Mexico.

The Mexican ball game was apparently developed by the Mayan culture of Southern Mexico. The earliest known ball court was found in the Mayan city of Copan and has been dated to A.D. 400. Most of the major Mayan cities and even the smaller towns had at least one ball court. The idea of the ball game was picked up by the Aztec culture during the height of their power in the 1400's. In the 1500's the Spanish conquerors of Mexico observed the game and left valuable descriptions of it.

The ball game was played by teams of two or more players and the object seems to have been to score goals either by putting the ball through a ring mounted on the wall of the court or through an "end zone". The ball was struck with the thighs, buttocks, head and perhaps with stone clubs. The hands and feet could not be used. These games were very rough: according to the Spanish chroniclers players were often badly wounded and sometimes killed during a contest.

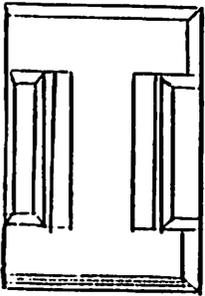
The ball used in the game was made of native rubber. The roots of the rubber tree were boiled and wax and pitch were added to make a thick paste which was formed into balls. These balls astounded the Spaniards because they bounced. (The game balls of Europe at this time were air-filled animal skins.) They were so taken with the rubber balls that 16,000 of them were sent to Spain as part of the tribute taken from the Aztec Empire.

Ball games were a great source of entertainment for the Aztecs and Mayas; games were wagered on and great rewards were given to players who accomplished the difficult task of scoring a goal. But the game also had religious significance. Sometimes players took on the roles of gods, reenacting cosmic ball games told of in their myths. There is some evidence that human sacrifice may have accompanied some of the contests. Carved panels in the Mayan city of Chichen Itza show the dismemberment of whole teams of ball players following a game. Whether it was the winners or the losers who were sacrificed is unclear.

It is thought that the ball game played at Wupatki had many of the aspects of its Mexican cousins. Undoubtedly the people here learned it from Indians in Southern Arizona (the Hohokam) who picked up the idea from contact with the peoples of Mexico. Many Mexican trade items have been found at Wupatki and although no rubber balls were among these, two have been found at sites in Southern Arizona. We know nothing about any religious associations to the game here but we can be fairly certain that human sacrifice was not part of the Wupatki version. Because of the large amount of work required to build a ball court and the number of courts that have been found, we can surmise that the ball game was a very important part of life for the Indians of Arizona and Wupatki. Perhaps it was connected to religion but maybe, after a hard week of work, the people of Wupatki simply enjoyed watching their favorite ball team strive for victory.

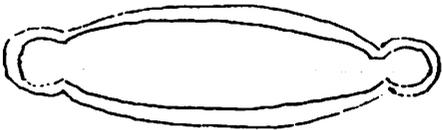
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BALL COURT TYPES



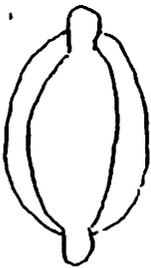
Highland Maya

Mayan ball courts were made of stone and often featured elaborate carvings on the walls. Notice the two "end zones", a typical feature of the Mayan courts. The walls of the structure were usually about 8 1/2 feet high. They were between 20 - 30 feet wide and 40 - 50 feet long.



Snaketown

The Snaketown type ball court was constructed by the Hohokam people of Southern Arizona before A.D. 900. This type of court was made of packed earth. One of the courts excavated at the Snaketown site was 160 feet long, 90 feet wide and had 12 foot high walls.



Casa Grande

The Casa Grande style ball court was typical of Post-1000 Hohokam ballcourts and is the type of court found at Wupatki. The Hohokam again built their courts out of packed earth while the courts found in the Wupatki area were built of stone. The court at Wupatki is 78 feet wide, 102 feet long and has 6 foot high walls.