

A CLOSER LOOK AT:

# POKATOK



POKATOK/POKTATOK/PITZ - THE MAYAN BALL GAME

**Pok-A-Tok** was a fast-paced ball game played by the Maya of Central America. It is their most famous game, which is thought to have been invented around **2000 BCE**. It seems that Pok-A-Tok was played in every major Maya city, but we aren't sure what they called it!

The objective of the game was to **get a ball through a narrow stone hoop placed on the court wall**, often as high up as 6m from the ground. Players were **not allowed to use their hands or feet - only their head, shoulders, elbows, wrists, and hips**. Games would go on without interruption for **long periods of time, often for days**. Scoring was so difficult that when a player managed to finally **get the ball through the ring fixed high up on the wall**, the game usually ended.

Pok-a-Tok may have been played in many different ways. Archaeologists have found courts that vary in size, and the ball may have been anywhere from the size of a tennis ball to a basketball.



Players would wear **protective padding** around their waists, and on one shin and forearm. Otherwise the **hard, solid-rubber ball** could have severely injured or even killed them. The padding, called **yokes**, was made of cotton stuffed into wooden frames. They also wore large ornate animal headdresses that may have represented what they believed to be their animal counterparts. Handstones known as 'manopla' were held to hit the ball with extra force, and may have been used to start the ball in play.

However, despite the safety precautions, the members of the **losing team** or at least the captain, were **killed in sacrifice to the gods**. Who would want to actually play Pok-A-Tok for fun if this was the result?

The ruins of Chichén Itzá in Mexico's Yucatán peninsula has **the biggest Pok-A-Tok court** of all Mesoamerica. It is **over 160m long and 70m wide**. Most ball courts had two sloping parallel walls inset with three round disks called markers or a **single stone ring**, at right angles to the ground. The Great Ballcourt of Chichén Itzá has its **walls covered with carved images of sacrifices made to the gods** at the game's end.



## HOW WERE POK-A-TOK BALLS MADE?

Mesoamerican people were using rubber by 1600 BCE. During harvest the Maya made diagonal cuts in the bark of cau-uchu trees to start the flow of latex down a central vertical channel and into their containers. The rubber was mixed with the juice of the Morning Glory vine to make it tough, strong, and very elastic - perfect for bouncing. It hardened within minutes, but before that would happen the Maya shaped the rubber into different sizes of balls.

For more research, check out [wikipedia.org/wiki/Mesoamerican\\_ballgame](https://www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mesoamerican_ballgame)