

Evolution & Behaviour

Ancient Mesoamerica demonstrates we've been ballgame lovers for more than 3000 years

by **Jeffrey P. Blomster**¹ | Associate Professor; **Victor E. Salazar Chávez**¹ | PhD Student

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¹: George Washington University, Washington, USA

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A ballgame was likely first 'kicked off' thousands of years ago in ancient Mesoamerica. Its Mesoamerican origin has long been associated with the lowland coastal cultures. Our discovery of the oldest highland ballcourt at Etlatongo in Mexico, dating to about 1374 BCE, highlights the importance of highland cultures in the ballgame's early evolution.



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Have you ever wondered about the origin of your favorite ballgame? It is perhaps much earlier than you guess. Mesoamerica – a center of ancient civilizations that flourished for over 3000 years before the Spanish invasion occurred – has evidence for ancient ballgames. In fact, the ballgame was one of the most long-lasting and iconic features of ancient Mesoamerican civilization. Yet its precise origin remains mysterious.

The historic area of Mesoamerica once covered today's Guatemala, Belize, central to southern Mexico, western Honduras, and western El Salvador. The two best-known Mesoamerican civilizations, the Maya and Aztec, tell us much about the ballgame's

history. Back in time, beyond being a sport, the ballgame had an important role in rituals, politics, and the daily life of people. Moreover, it was highly symbolic, as the ball's movement during the game represented an astronomical event and the regeneration of life. Over 2300 probable [ballcourts](#) partially preserved today prove the ballgame's great importance in ancient Mesoamerican societies.

To approach the ballgame's ancient origin, scientists usually focus on one type of ballgame that was most widely played throughout Mesoamerica. People played this ballgame in a ballcourt, hitting a rubber ball with their hips rather than hands. This was likely the only ancient ballgame that needed a formal

ballcourt – the best testimony for the ballgame’s presence in ancient times. The basic form of the ballcourt comprises a long, narrow alley flanked by two parallel walls or mounds. In addition to this basic architecture, ballcourts’ structures show many varieties, suggesting that the ballgame evolved differently depending on the region.

Scholars usually assert that this popular Mesoamerican ballgame first evolved in the lowlands, where early civilizations developed along the Gulf Coast and Pacific Coast of southern Mexico. In the lowlands, various goods linked to the ballgame – such as figurines of ballplayers at several Gulf Coast sites and rubber balls – have been found. The oldest known formal ballcourt – dating to around 1650 BCE at Paso de la Amada in the Pacific coastal lowlands of southern Chiapas – further supports the association of the lowlands with the ballgame’s origins. This ballcourt was built 800 years earlier than the next oldest lowland ballcourt. Unlike the lowlands, no ballcourt prior to 600/500 BCE had been found in the highlands – until we recently made an important discovery.

From 2015 to 2017, we conducted research at Etlatongo, in the Mixtec region of Oaxaca, Mexico. While the original purpose of our excavations was to document houses from the Early Formative period (1500-1000 BCE) at this regional center, we also explored an area of public space, where we made an unexpected discovery. To our great surprise, we discovered the most ancient Mesoamerican ballcourts associated with the highlands, dating to the Early Formative period.

Indeed, we discovered two well-preserved ballcourts on top of each other. If you are curious about how they look, [visit this link to the image](#) showing the overall architecture of these two ballcourts. The first ballcourt (left in the image) was between 46 and 52 meters in length and made of compacted soil, bedrock and stones. The central 6-meter wide alley – which was likely once painted red – was framed by shallow benches (or banquettes), on which players seemed to bounce a ball. Scientific dating techniques determined a date between 1443–1305 BCE. The second ballcourt (right in the image) was similar to the first ballcourt in length, however, it was much wider and thus covered a larger area of between 1817 and 2054 square meters. A series of terraces modified much of the area around the ballcourt, separating it from normal village life. We also found small ceramic figurines of ballplayers, wearing yokes or hip protectors as people actually did when playing the popular ball game. These findings strongly suggest that people at Etlatongo played the popular ballgame using these ballcourts.

In summary, we discovered that the Etlatongo ballcourts date from the Early Formative period, making them the oldest associated with highland Mesoamerica. Importantly, the Etlatongo ballcourts are just a few hundred years more recent than the most ancient lowland ballcourt, raising a question about the current leading hypothesis that the ancient ballgame evolved primarily in the lowlands. As our study highlights the significance of its early evolutions in the highlands, future study should focus on both lowland and highland Mesoamerica, which will, in turn, help us uncover the true origin of the ballgame.