

“Central America’s Pastime Lives On”

This is John Kennedy with another Postcard from Abroad from the University of Kansas Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies.

KU takes great pride in owning the original handwritten rules to basketball, but the game is far older than James Naismith. Basketball can actually be traced back to the Central American game of ulama, which has been played for about 3500 years. The Olmecs, whose name translates to “rubber people,” created a game in which players tried to get a cantaloupe-sized rubber ball through a small elevated hoop using only their hips or forearms; the hard part was that the ball weighed about nine pounds, leading inevitably to serious injuries. During its heyday, ulama was a popular pastime from Paraguay through what is now Arizona. Players in Mexico still carry on the centuries-old tradition of ulama – bruises and all. Imagine how different games in Allen Fieldhouse would be with a nine-pound ball and no one allowed to use their hands!

With thanks to Aron Muci for this text, from the KU Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies. This is John Kennedy – wish you were here!

Educators Resources:

Interested to learn more about Ancient Mesoamerica and the the game of Ulama? Check out selected resources for teachers and students.

Listen & Read:

“An Ancient Ballgame Makes a Comeback in Mexico”

<https://www.npr.org/2018/09/16/646756260/an-ancient-ballgame-makes-a-comeback-in-mexico>

Wikipedia Page for Mesoamerican Ballgames

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mesoamerican_ballgame

“The 3,500-Year-Old Rubber Ball That Changed Sports Forever”

<https://www.history.com/news/the-3500-year-old-rubber-ball-that-changed-sports-forever>

Videos:

“Mayan Ball Games Mexico Feb 2012”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J-RW4JJZvDs&t=230s>

“Reviving a 3,000-year-old Ancient Ballgame”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oYJxng6i4NQ>

“Xcaret-Pok-ta-Pok Mayan Ball Game”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jKvQjgC9sIY>

Teaching about Ancient Mesoamerica:

The Amazing Twins: Ancient Maya Tales from the Popol Wuj, Grades K-4, K-5, 9-12

<https://as.vanderbilt.edu/clas-resources/resource.php?id=28>

Signs of Change: A Glimpse of Past & Present Cultural Landscapes of Guatemala, Grades, K-12

<http://stonecenter.tulane.edu/articles/detail/1401/Signs-of-Change-A-K-12-Curriculum-on-the-Contemporary-Maya>

Introducing the Ancient Maya to the Classroom (Including Ulama Ballgame), Grades K-12

<http://stonecenter.tulane.edu/articles/detail/722/Introducing-the-Ancient-Maya-to-the-Classroom>

Mixtec Cultural Discovery Box (Physical or Online), Grades K-5

https://latinamericanstudies.sdsu.edu/resources/history_culture.html#mixtec_box

Teaching Central America, Grades K-12

<https://www.teachingcentralamerica.org>

Exploration and Conquest in the Americas, Grades K-12

<http://laili.unm.edu/info/k-12-educators/curriculum/exploration-and-conquest-in-the-americas.html>

Conquests of Spanish America, Grades K-12

<http://laili.unm.edu/info/k-12-educators/curriculum/conquests-of-spanish-america.html>