IT IS A BRISK FALL AFTERNOON in the year of 957 A.D.

There is a thrill of expectation in the air, for it is the day of the big game. Since early morning the roads into town have been filled with eager visitors. Many of them have left their homes in the early morning hours in order to take advantage of the gala market and to assure themselves of good seats at the ball game.

By noon the town is crowded. Everyone is dressed in his best finery. Many have brought lunches and can be seen eating in shady spots on the outskirts of town, while others prefer to buy a hot meal at the food stalls which have been set up around the market place.

As the hour of the game approaches there is a flow of movement toward the big ball court. Outside vendors hawk their wares in hopes of a few last minute sales. Inside the band is playing and there is much good-natured jostling as the people settle themselves for the big event. Final bets are in the making when there is a roar from the crowd.

The team has just made its appearance. A moment later another roar from the opposite side of the court announces the arrival of the opposing team on the field. Finally the referee takes his place in the center of the court and gives the signal. The ball bounces into the air and the game has begun. (See Figure 1.)

If all this sounds vaguely familiar to the reader of 1957 it is as it should be. Had it not been for the sporting enthusiasm of our Indian predecessors on this continent the competitive ball game, as we know it today, might never have come into existence.

Not only were these enterprising people responsible for the discovery of rubber and

The roots of modern football are bathed in blood. An anthropologist recalls all the violence and charm of the ancient Indian ball game.

By STEPHAN BORHEGYI, with illustrations by TOM P. SEALE
its usefulness in the form of a rubber ball, but they may have done much to influence the form in which our modern games of ball are played.

When the Spanish arrived to conquer the New World early in the 16th century they first witnessed the ball game—which at that time was already 500 years old—in Mexico and the Antilles. They marvelled at the ball that was solid and heavy and yet bounced so vigorously.

The Spanish chronicler Torquemada (1613) left us the following description: "It has one property which is that it jumps and rebounds upward, and continues jumping here to there so that those who run after it become tired before they catch it."

Prior to this the only balls known in Europe were made of leather and were filled with hair or an inflated bladder. It was not long thereafter that rubber, and the rubber ball, was introduced to Spain and the rest of Europe, along with various descriptions of the New World ball games.

We know that a type of hand game, the pallone, was popular in Spain, France and Italy during the 15th century. This game had Mediterranean origins and seems to have been the predecessor of modern tennis. The idea of two organized teams engaged in inter-village competitive play was, however, most probably a novelty to the European and this example from the New World may have been responsible for the birth of modern team sport.

The Middle American ball game, as described to us by Spanish chroniclers, was a cross between basketball, football, hockey and jai alai. It was played in high walled courts (100 to 125 feet long and 20 to 50 feet wide) whose floor plans were the shape of a capital "L." The game had as its object the knocking of a solid rubber ball 6 to 8 inches in diameter through the stone rings set vertically in the center of each of the two long walls. The diameter of the ring varied from 6 to 12 inches which made the scoring of a goal a rather difficult task. (See Figure 2.)

The number of players varied. There were amateur and professional teams and nearly every settlement of any size boasted at least one ball court. In some contests large teams—9 to 11 players—were used, while in others only two expert players took part. How the ball game was put into play is not known but, once begun, the players performed with such skill and dexterity that there were times when the heavy rubber ball did not touch the ground for the duration of an hour, during which it
flew from one end of the ball court to the other. The other team scored whenever a shot was missed, or when the ball was hurled into the end zone of the opposing side.

The bouncing of the ball against the side walls was quite important and many of the finer tricks of the game were apparently based on this point. The most important score was made, however, when the ball was sent through the stonering. This was so difficult that it was accomplished only rarely, and when it happened the game was concluded in great excitement and applause. The "star" player who accomplished this feat won not only the game but was entitled to collect the clothing and jewels of the spectators. Generally a merry scramble ensued and there was a mass exodus of all those present in the grandstand.

"Star" players were highly honored by chiefs and commoners alike, but since the game was so strenuous it is hard to imagine that they could have remained at the top of their form for long. The heavy ball was not allowed to come into contact with the hands, feet or calves, but was propelled only by the elbows, knees and hips. Injuries sustained in the game often developed into serious bone ailments in spite of the fact that padded knee, hip and elbow guards were used. (See Figure 4b.)

An eyewitness account by the chronicler Duran (1585) gives us some idea of the casualties that happened not infrequently during the course of the game: "Some of them were carried dead out of the place and the reason was that as they ran, tired and out of breath, after the ball from one end to the other, they would see the ball come in the air and in order to reach it first before others would rebound on the pit of their stomach or in the hollow, so that they fell to the ground out of breath, and some of them died instantly, because of their ambition to reach the ball before anybody else . . . . They were so quick to hit it with their knees or seats that they returned the ball with extraordinary velocity. With these thrusts they suffered great damage on the knees or on the thighs, with the results that those who for smartness often used them, got their haunches so mangled that they had those places cut with a small knife and

Figure 4a. Modern O. U. football player (at left) in full uniform as seen by artist Tom P. Seale. Compare him with player at right.

Figure 4b. Maya ball game player (at right), fully equipped and ready for the game. Player wears body paddings. (Circa 900 A.D.)

Figure 5. Sacrifice of the losing team's captain (by decapitation) with an obsidian knife in the middle of the ball court (Codex Borgia).
extracted blood which the blows of the ball had gathered."

In spite of the fact that players occasionally died and often were severely wounded, the rewards of being a "star" were so great that these dangers were considered inconsequential.

There was even greater risk involved for the team captains. The winning captain was overwhelmed with honors and gifts but the unfortunate captain of the losing team was not infrequently decapitated as a sacrifice to the gods! (See Figure 5.) A modern parallel is the case of the hapless coach who is fired after a losing season as a sacrifice to the "almighty" alumni.

The rather harsh treatment of the losing captain becomes somewhat more understandable to us when we realize the extent of the gambling which invariably accompanied the game. Both the players and the spectators laid wagers on the outcome of the contest, the stake varying with the status and wealth of the individual. Rulers might play for principalities or kingdoms, as when the ruler of Tenochtitlan—today Mexico City—wagered his entire yearly income against that of the ruler of Xochimilco.

Lesser nobles and chiefs played for jades and turquoise, jewelry of gold, feather robes, articles of clothing, cocoa, cornfields, houses, and for slaves and concubines. The common people, since their means were less, wagered fields, crops, granaries, and houses, and sometimes even sold themselves or their children into slavery to meet their bets.

Chronicler Duran\(^1\) tells us that at nightfall on the day before the game those gamblers took the ball and placed it on a plate with other items of ball game equipment. They then worshipped it and made offerings to it, praying fervently that it should be favorable the following day.

As the hour of the game approached, the stone or wooden images of the patron gods

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The Pride of Mexico, musicians playing at the ball game (1400 A.D., Codex Florentino, XXIII-19), may be compared by way of their intent if not by way of numerical strength.

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