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In Belize, Maya Descendants Are Reviving an Ancient, Sacred Ballgame

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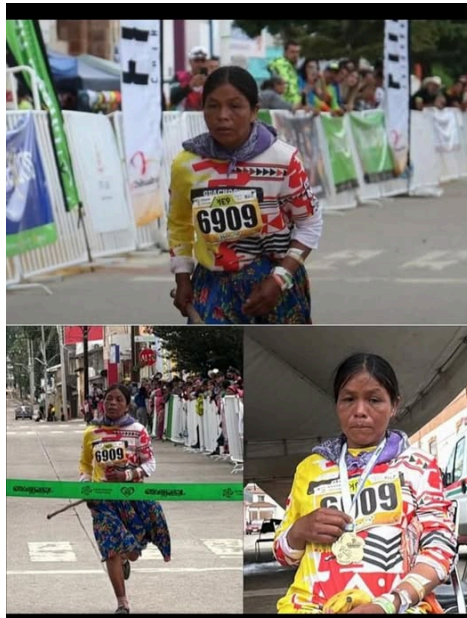
Used EV batteries could upend the race for long-duration storage

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Singers in South Carolina sustain their ancestors' sacred songs

Shopping for a robot?

Sharing out Language Love/College of the Redwoods Indigenous Language Institute



No coach. No sponsors. No fancy gear.

Just 14 hours of walking through the rugged Tarahumara/Raramuri mountains — and Candelaria Rivas Ramos crossed the finish line in first place.

This extraordinary runner from Chihuahua, Mexico, stunned the world at the 2025 Canyon Ultra Marathon, winning the brutal 63-kilometer race in 7 hours and 34 minutes.

She came alone.

No team.

No tennis shoes — just traditional huaraches on her feet, and a flowing skirt that spoke of her roots.

Candelaria didn't just battle altitude, exhaustion, and the scorching terrain.

She ran against a system that often overlooks those without funding, coaching, or exposure.

And still —

She won.

Her victory isn't just athletic — it's cultural.

It's about resilience.

It's about Indigenous pride.

It's about showing the world that strength doesn't come from privilege...

It comes from within.

Waves of life

In Belize, Maya Descendants Are Reviving an Ancient, Sacred Ballgame

A movement is underway to make pok-ta-pok, the world's oldest team ballgame, the national sport



The pok-ta-pok revival began in Mexico in the mid-1900s, but it only picked up steam over the past decade, with Belize playing a leading role on the global stage. Belize Tourism Board

The woodsy scent of [copal](#) rises into the tropical forest surrounding [Xunantunich](#), an archaeological site in Belize that dates to the Classic period of Maya civilization nearly 2,000 years ago. Near the steps of El Castillo, the grandest of the site's 25 or so temples and palaces, Felicita Cantun, a diminutive Belizean grandmother with a profusion of bright flowers pinned to her gray bun, bends over the dish of smoldering resin. In Yucatec Maya, she calls on the four cardinal directions.

Cantun waves the smoke over two young men to cleanse them in preparation for playing *pok-ta-pok*, the world's oldest team ballgame. Part sport and part ritual, pok-ta-pok was nearly lost during Spanish colonization in the 16th century. Now, in a country where resources for athletics are limited and often go to better-known games such as soccer and basketball, a movement is afoot to transform pok-ta-pok into Belize's national sport.

Key takeaways: Rules of modern pok-ta-pok

- Modern pok-ta-pok is played with five players on a side. Players must strike the nine-pound ball into the air or across the ground with their hips.
- A team earns points by hitting the ball into the other team's end zone. Points are deducted if players hit the ball with their hands or accidentally sit on it. Ten points are awarded when a team hits the ball through a ring positioned 13 feet off the ground on each side of the court. In a semifinal or final, a hoop means an automatic win for a team.

The pok-ta-pok revival began in Mexico in the mid-1900s, but it only picked up steam over the past decade, with Belize playing a leading role on the global stage. Now, nearly 20 teams are set to face off at the sixth [International Pok-ta-Pok Tournament](#) in Copán, Honduras, from September 25 to 28.

“We don’t see it just as sports,” says Jonathan Sosa, Cantun’s 19-year-old grandson and a Belizean senior-team player. “We take a lot of pride in going to other countries and giving our best to bring back first place. Pok-ta-pok is going to be a big deal for us.”

Belize's players celebrate with Mexico in the final of the Tournament in 2021. Hugo



the trophy after defeating International Pok-ta-Pok Borges/AFP via Getty Images

The body in motion

originated with the [Olmecs](#), the “mother culture” of Mesoamerica, in what is now south-central Mexico, it features prominently in the [Popol Vuh](#), a 16th-century recounting of centuries-old Maya creation stories discovered in the Guatemalan Highlands in the early 1700s by a Spanish priest.

Although pok-ta-pok probably

In the book, the hero twins Hunahpu and Xbalanque avenge the deaths of their father and uncle at the hands of the lords of the underworld by triumphing over the rulers in a ballgame and various other trials. The young men self-sacrifice and eventually ascend to the heavens, becoming the sun and the moon.

Based on [painted vases](#), [sculptures](#) and other art that depict pok-ta-pok, the game likely symbolized the movement of the sun, and the cycle of life and death. It was played for fun, to mark important seasonal events and even to settle disputes, as a substitute for going to war. Although the ritual sacrifice of players occasionally followed a game—it was a tremendous honor to offer oneself to the gods—pok-ta-pok was not about bloodlust, and players did not compete using the severed head of an enemy, two pervasive misconceptions about the sport.

Stone bas-relief along the Ball Court

references Puigmall

When

pok-ta-pok equally
“There’s a which is



relief carvings that extend side walls of the Great at Chichén Itzá have hieroglyphics with to pok-ta-pok. Gerard Getty Images

Spanish Catholic missionaries witnessed in the 1600s, they were awed and offended. real focus on the body, not very Christian.

Christianity encouraged not being distracted by the pleasures of life,” says [Christopher von Nagy](#), an anthropologist and historian at the University of Nevada, Reno. “Mesoamericans were

the opposite. The game was about the body, about motion and celebrating what our bodies can do.”

According to [Simon Martin](#), associate curator at the [Penn Museum](#), an archaeology and anthropology museum at the University of Pennsylvania, in ancient times, pok-ta-pok was played on 80-plus-foot, often I-shaped courts with narrow central corridors. The sides of the court, made from limestone bricks, sloped upward, which provided an additional surface for bouncing the ball. Courts bore stone markers on the floors or walls that archaeologists believe were part of the scoring system. On some courts, a small vertical ring, barely larger than the ball itself, was set high up on each of the long walls.

“We start to see an explosion of courts of all types in the Middle Formative period [900-300 B.C.E.],” says von Nagy. “A bunch of them show up in the Northern Yucatán and all over Oaxaca.”

Nearly 2,000 pok-ta-pok courts have been excavated to date, including 6 at [Tula](#), 20 at [El Tajín](#) and 24 at [Cantona](#), all in Mexico. Tikal, Guatemala’s best-known Maya settlement, has five. [The oldest courts face north-south](#). From the Middle Classic period (600-700 C.E.) onward, the orientation changed to east-west, most likely to align the rings with the setting sun during the autumn equinox.

*Few pok-ta-pok
splendor of the
foot-wide Great
Chichén Itzá.
Universal Images
Images*



*courts match the
545-foot-long, 225-
foot-wide Great
Ball Court at
Chichén Itzá.
Geography Photos/
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Few pok-ta-pok courts match the splendor of the 545-foot-long, 225-foot-wide [Great Ball Court](#) at [Chichén Itzá](#), a Terminal Classic (800-925 C.E.) Maya city in Mexico’s Yucatán Peninsula. Compared with other playing fields, the Great Ball Court, one of more than a dozen in Chichén Itzá, is, von Nagy says, “like Beijing’s Olympic stadium.” Martin believes the scale and detail of the facility might indicate that it was used for ceremonial gameplay instead of everyday sport.

For more than 1,000 years, between 1.5 million and 2 million Maya lived in Belize. Between 800 and 950 C.E., in the wake of [multiyear droughts](#), the Maya began to abandon cities around Mesoamerica and migrate north to the Yucatán Peninsula. According to Melissa Badillo, director of Belize’s [Institute of Archaeology](#), they left behind thousands of sites in Belize, only a fraction

of which have been discovered, and even fewer excavated. Of these, 14 are open to the public, including Caracol, [where an intact royal tomb was recently unearthed](#).

Caracol, which [surpassed Tikal as the major regional seat of power around 562 C.E.](#), has the largest and best-preserved Belizean ball court. The more eroded and moss-covered courts at [Cahal Pech](#) and [Xunantunich](#) have yielded important archaeological finds, including a richly carved ball ring. All three sites are located in the forests of the Mopan River Valley, along Belize's western border with Guatemala, where hut-lined villages and coconut groves are more common than sport fields.

Although archaeologists have not found a definitive record of how the game was played or its scoring system, ancient artworks and the *Popol Vuh* point to a two-team system with multiple players on each side. Depending on the game variation, the ball was struck with the hips, forearms and possibly even sticks. Points were probably awarded for hitting stone markers, moving the ball into the opponents' end zone or bouncing the ball through the wall-mounted ring.



This carved stone ring is set high in the wall of the Great Ball Court at Chichén Itzá. Jon G. Fuller/VW PICS/ Universal Images Group via Getty Images

Von Nagy says that spectators arrived in droves to watch games. In lieu of a ticketing system, the wealthiest donned jewelry that the winning players were allowed to “loot” after a successful tournament.

The anthropologist points to discoveries near some courts of heavy stone figurines of people or animals with a part, such as the head, intentionally broken off. This, he explains, might have given rise to early explorers' misunderstanding of the Maya as a butchery-happy culture. “The figures are a form of sacrificial offering where you're not sacrificing things that are actually alive,” von Nagy says.

Although Spanish colonizers forbade pok-ta-pok, thinking it too carnal, [Indigenous communities in the Mexican state of Sinaloa continued to practice it](#) in secret, and they eventually spread the game farther afield. In a [2023 paper for the Journal of Sport for Development](#), researchers Jairzinho Panqueba and Emilie Carreón traced renewed interest in the sport to an exhibition played in Mexico City during the 1968 Summer Olympics, “when players from Sinaloa played an exhibition rubber ballgame in Mexico City ... and the search for its antecedents became a research topic.”

By the 1990s, pok-ta-pok had caught the attention of marketers in the Riviera Maya, who incorporated it into glitzy shows at resorts in the Mexican Caribbean. According to Panqueba and Carreón, between 2001 and 2014, meetings dubbed the Linguistic and Cultural Encounters of the Maya People brought together Maya descendants from Mexico, Belize and Guatemala, and the game began to spread.

Modern-day pok-ta-pok

Today, variations on pok-ta-pok go by different names, including *ulama*, *chajchaay* and *chaaj*. The sport is played by teams from nine Mexican states, plus Guatemala, Honduras, Panama and Belize. [Las Vegas and Yuma, Arizona](#), also have teams, as do the San Fernando Valley, San Diego and East Los Angeles, California.

In Belize, the sport's revival is credited to Cantun, a schoolteacher-turned-cultural ambassador who has dedicated much of her career to the preservation of Yucatec Maya culture, from language translation to traditional dance. For her work, in February, Charles III bestowed upon her the title of [Officer of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire](#). (Belize was a British colony until 1981 and remains a Commonwealth realm.)

"In school, they used to teach us about this game, but we didn't even have its name," Cantun recalls. In 2015, following a conversation with a friend in Mérida, Mexico, where the sport was being reclaimed by Maya descendants, she fielded a team of young Belizean men. She named the team Ek Balam, or "black jaguar," an homage to her spirit animal. In Maya culture, animals hold religious, mythological and symbolic importance, and served as guardian spirits to their human companions.

Since then, Belize's well of pok-ta-pok talent has deepened to about 40 athletes across multiple teams, including children's, boys under 17 and men's senior teams. In keeping with [ancient art depicting skilled female players](#), Belize also has an under-17 girls' team and a senior women's team.

"Feeder" leagues like these mimic ancestral sport. "In big cities especially, like Tikal [in Guatemala], I imagine it was like peewee football, with kids who are just starting out, all the way up to professional players. We know they had recreational play, and we know they had tournament play," von Nagy says.

A Mexican player hits the ball with his hip during the final of the International Pok-ta-Pok Tournament against Belize, in Merida, state of Yucatan, Mexico, in December 2021. Hugo Borges/AFP via Getty Images



The modern-day game is most often played in an [open field called a *taste*](#), approximately 200 feet long and 13 feet wide.

According to Miguel Duran, captain of the San Fernando Valley team and trainer of all players on U.S. teams that represent the country in international play, five players use a formation that resembles the number five on a die, with two in front and in back, and one in the center.

Athletes play either barefoot or in sandals. Some don gloves to protect their hands against scrapes from contact with the ground. For both men and women, the uniform, or *fajado*, consists of a leather or suede loincloth, an extra piece of animal hide or padding that protects their dominant hip, a leather belt that wraps beneath the buttocks and ties over the hips in front, and a long strip of fabric that is wound tightly around the waist to expose the iliac crest, the curved part

at the top of the pelvis. While men typically play topless, women's uniforms include a tank top or T-shirt.

The hard bone of the iliac crest is what players use for rebounding the ball either into the air or across the ground. Touching the nine-pound ball—made of the [solid, nonvulcanized sap](#) of the Panama rubber tree (*Castilla elastica*)—with any other part of the body results in penalties and can lead to injuries such as broken ribs. Athletes may not push, tackle or block another player.

For Sosa, pok-ta-pok is as much about masterful judgment as it is about athletic prowess. “You have to know how the ball moves and have great timing,” he says, noting that a single, well-planned strike can send the rubber sphere flying as far as 90 feet across the court. The ball is kept in constant motion throughout the game, a [nod to the Maya philosophy of the unity of opposites](#), where human and divine realities meet, and where opposing forces depend on one another for their continued existence.

Scoring relies on addition and subtraction. For example, rebounding the ball into the other team's end zone garners points, whereas hitting the ball with the hands or accidentally sitting on it results in a deduction. The rings set 13 feet above the ground on each side function similarly to a vertical basketball hoop. Score a hoop goal during a regular match and a team gets ten points. During a semifinal or a final, if the ball passes through the hoop, it's an automatic win. This is how Mexico unseated Belize, the three-time world champion, in 2023.

For elite players, pok-ta-pok is the polar opposite of more popular sports like football and soccer, in regards to their tailgating culture. “In modern sports, all the sacredness has been taken out,” says Duran. “You get a bunch of people getting drunk, being loud. That's not how we do it. No one is allowed to drink or indulge in any substances when we play. This is a sacred game, and when we play, we play with honor.”

Beyond the thrill of competing against the best in the world, Duran says, “It is cultural inheritance. This is something that our ancestors played, from the poorest to the richest.”



Belize's national teams and training squads use the court, Ts'unu'un, at Jardín Pachamama, which measures 100 feet long by 50 feet wide, for both practice and cultural-heritage demonstrations. Belize Tourism Board

Orange Walk, a lush, sugarcane-growing town on the western bank of the New River, about 45 miles from the southern border of the Mexican state of Quintana Roo, and within an hour's drive of several ancient Maya sites, is the modern headquarters of pok-ta-pok in Belize. In 2023, Cantun helped spearhead the building of a \$75,000 court, [Ts'unu'un, at Jardín Pachamama](#). Belize's national teams and training squads use the court, which measures 100 feet long by 50 feet wide, for both practice and cultural heritage demonstrations.

When Duran’s San Fernando Valley-based team competed in Belize in 2023, camaraderie superseded mere play. “Seeing them turning [pok-ta-pok] into their national sport—how cool is that?” he says. “They all greeted us like we were brothers and sisters. They gave us a presentation about their different dances and music and food. Understanding how they have kept certain traditions alive, how it all ties back to our ancestors, it was something we’ll never forget.” Cantun adds, “This is not just any sport. This is spiritual. It is connected to the [Maya cosmovision](#).” The court, she says, is both a place to play and a potent symbol for Belize’s Maya descendants.

“We are here, we are growing, and I am sure the ancestors are proud of these youths,” Cantun says. “They’re proud of me also for bringing [the game] back.”

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### Debbie Smith CTE Academy, on former Hug site, prepares for first day of school

By [Ben Deach](#) Published: Aug. 5, 2025 at 3:53 PM PDT|Updated: 3 hours ago

RENO, Nev. (KOLO) - The site of what once was Hug High School was packed on Tuesday with teachers, administrators, and state leaders who all made a point to come out to see northern Nevada’s newest school.

“We have everything from engineering to biomedical to nursing to construction to teaching and training,” said CTE Director Dr. Josh Hartzog. “We have a number of options for our students that are going to prepare them to engage with our economy at a pretty high level.”

The Washoe County School District says over 700,000 hours of work went into transforming the former Hug High School into what is now Debbie Smith CTE academy.

CTE stands for career and technical education academy, making it a bit different from traditional high schools.

“We have 90 min periods,” said Principal Mike Gifford. “As a freshman they are usually taking one of their academy courses.”



The new school - whose mascot will be the Mavericks – will be able to hold 1000 students. The district says it will allow for different focused areas of education, in programs that include nursing, building, welding, engineering, and marketing.

“We retain so much more information when we care about what we’re doing and we can see that it’s going to help us out in our future,” Gifford added. “Both near and far future.”

The buildings namesake died back in 2016, but her memory has and will continue to live on.

“There is no single one member of our community (3:34) that’s had more of an impact on education than her,” stressed Beth Smith, president of the WCSD board of trustees. “Thanks to Debbie Smith, we’ve built and rebuilt 12 schools. We have seven sites in construction and planned, and we are into our second billion dollars of investment in Washoe County schools.”

Greg smith made sure to be on hand for Tuesdays ribbon cutting and says his late wife’s quote stating “education is the great equalizer” is fitting to have immortalized on the school’s wall.

“She probably would have preferred it be named after someone else,” said Greg Smith. “But in our hearts and our family’s hearts, this was the perfect place to have her name on it.”

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Sorry for late notice. Hopefully a recording available. sdc

Comment on Higher Ed Program Changes: Public Hearing This Thursday

The U.S. Department of Education will hold a virtual public hearing **this Thursday, August 7, from 9:00 AM to 4:00 PM ET**, to begin negotiated rulemaking on Title IV programs under the [Higher Education Act](#).

This rulemaking will shape the future of federal student loans, Pell Grants, and other essential financial aid programs that many Native students rely on to access and complete higher education. It follows statutory changes signed into law on July 4, 2025, as part of [Public Law 119-21, the One Big Beautiful Bill Act](#).

This is a critical opportunity for Tribal Nations, Native students, and educators to provide input. **Submit written comments by August 28, 2025 at the link below. Ensure Native voices are heard before rules are drafted.**

[Stream Here](#)

[Submit Comments Here](#)

414,469 tons. That’s how much lithium GM will need *per year* to meet its 2035 EV target



Collectors with an interest in Western American memorabilia and related ephemera will want to check out the **Wild West Wonders** live auction this weekend. The penultimate event is one of the last live auctions that **Holabird Western Americana Collections** will hold before president and founder Fred Holabird retires at the end of the year. Numerous items will be up for auction—antique stocks and bonds, mining collectibles, numismatics, Native American jewelry, Civil War and World War II ephemera, among many other rarities. Some highlights include mineral-ore specimens and stock certificates from the collection of mining geologist Dave Shaddrick; Western saloon photographs from Alaska, California, Nevada and other areas; and California and Nevada scrip and choice Western mining stocks, and documents from the collection of Nevada historian and author Douglas McDonald. The auction starts at **8 a.m., Friday through Sunday, Aug. 8-10**, at **Holabird Western Americana Collections, 3555 Airway Drive, Suite 308**. Bids can be placed in person, over the phone with an agent, or online. Check out www.holabirdamericana.com for more details.

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Used EV batteries could upend the race for long-duration storage

Redwood Materials says second-life batteries are the cheapest form of long-duration storage. If true, battery startups are in trouble — and renewables are in luck.

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USDA abruptly cancels rural energy grant application window

A \$2.5 billion pledge makes women's health a priority in Gates Foundation spend-down

Singers in South Carolina sustain their ancestors' sacred songs

Shopping for a robot? China's new robot store in photos

A high-tech district in the Chinese capital is opening an [all-service robot store to push a national drive to develop humanoid robots](#). From plucking boxes off a pharmacy shelf to serving drinks from behind a bar, robots at the government-run facility showcase how far humanoid robot development has come — and how far it has to go.

Dude, the history behind the word dude is wild

[https://www.npr.org/2025/07/30/nx-s1-5482984/dude-big-lebowski-surfer-origin-etymology?](https://www.npr.org/2025/07/30/nx-s1-5482984/dude-big-lebowski-surfer-origin-etymology?utm_placement=newsletter&user_id=66c4c6935d78644b3ab73873)
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