

Reports and Comments

Transcending Ethnocentrism in Sport Research: The Case of Aztec Player Gambling

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In response to the disclosure by some American football and basketball players that they had been actively involved in betting on their teams, *Sports Illustrated*—the most widely read sports magazine in the United States—gave its disapproving view. It claimed that player-gambling posed a true crisis, representing "a subtle erosion of the quality of sport" (Underwood 1967: 169).

Unfortunately, this typical Western attitude concerning player-gambling has occasionally infiltrated research studies done of other cultures. For example, Goellner (1953) makes the point that widespread player-gambling corrupted the Aztec ball game, and that rampant wagering would have eventually led to the sport's downfall. According to Goellner:

This aspect of the game [player-gambling] at the time of the first Spaniards was undoubtedly a sign of its degeneracy and the coming of the white man probably did little to destroy a sport which was at the time already showing signs of the decay that would have ultimately brought about its end or severe modification (1953: 166).

Goellner's observation, however, shows a lack of understanding about the nature of Aztec society, where righteous behavior was expected from all its citizens and the population lived according to the strictest moral code (Soustelle 1964; Vaillant 1965; Berdan 1982). In other words, if the Aztecs had found player-gambling to be sinful, they would have not permitted it. Yet, as far as this practice was concerned, the sixteenth-century ethnohistorical sources (e.g., Torquemada 1943; Sahagun 1954; Duran 1971) indicate that it was considered neither immoral nor illegal. On the contrary, betting by athletes was encouraged in Aztec society. Indeed, Soustelle is puzzled by this very point, when he asserts:

It is a curious fact that the Aztecs, although they were so puritanical about drinking and although their sex life was so restrained, never seem to have tried to restrain gambling (1964: 167).

Researchers such as Soustelle (1964) and Von Hagen (1961) have gone so far as to claim that the Aztecs might have actually been addicted to gambling.

The fact that player-gambling was not condemned in strict Aztec society could mean that it somehow had a positive adaptive function. The hypothesis that player-gambling serves an adaptive function in certain types of competition, like the Aztec ball game, has previously been suggested by Barry and Roberts (1972). After a brief description is given of the Aztec ball game and the kinds of wagering that accompanied it, Barry and Roberts' hypothesis will be explored in greater detail.