



Racquet sports traditionally conjure up thoughts of tennis, squash and badminton. There is another racquet sport, jai alai, which traces its origins to Roman times. This esoteric game receives little mainstream coverage so it was suggested that Derryck Draper take a look at this sport, one which has certainly not yet found its way into the Olympics.

Hard, fast and ignoring danger

It was once said of a wife who insisted that a particularly arduous home-build project should be completed, despite the onset of darkness and lowering temperatures, that she had 'a heart harder than a goat's knee'. If the description were physically true, then it is likely that the same organ might some day have had a part to play in the production of the pelota, the ball used in the game of jai alai.

Derived from the Roman game which also gave tennis to the world, the Basque version of handball, jai alai ('merry festival') was originally played face-to-face on a rough court laid out in the village square on feast days. The development of solid rubber balls compelled a positional change, returning the ball to a wall rather than over a net, which eventually led to the current official title of 'the fastest ball game in the world' and the projectile achieving speeds up to 185 miles per hour.

Playing dimensions

Unusually for a game that is currently so popular in North America – the greatest concentration of jai alai frontons is in the state of Florida – there are no regulations controlling the size of the cancha (the playing court). Generally they are in the order of an open rectangle with walls 35 to 40 feet high. The long, or side, wall will be up to 190 feet in

Top player Arriaga has just returned to play after severe head trauma. His anticipated layoff of 12 months was commuted to 6½ weeks due to his superb physical fitness and the fact that every fronton has a fully trained paramedic team on standby.



length; the front and back walls up to 36 feet wide. The front wall on a Florida cancha is likely to be up to half a metre in thickness and composed of granite blocks to provide a fast bounce and to withstand the constant 'punching' from the ball. But one should not be surprised to find canchas in Latin America or the country of origin which consist of the walls of local houses and the village church – and that bear little or no resemblance to any dedicated construction.

Craftmanship

All the basic playing equipment was originally made by hand, and this is still the case today. The pelota (the ball) is approximately three-quarters of the size of a baseball and harder than a golf ball. Its core is hand wound rubber built up over a month of layering, which is then covered with nylon thread. Over this comes the first of two layers of goat skin, both hand cut and sewn. The outer layer is the hardest (goat's knee perhaps?), but is nevertheless being replaced constantly as it splits under the enormous pressure to which the ball is subjected. This layer may last anything from two to twenty minutes during play.

No two pelotas have the same characteristics, which is said by some to increase the challenge of the game.

There are as many variations on the game as days in the week. Some use a bat or paddle, others a form of strung racquet. One, appropriately called pelota-mano, even uses the bare hands – albeit with a softer, slower ball. But the game of which most people are aware is played using the cesta, a long curved beak of a basket attached to the player's hand by a glove and the cinta – a cord which straps the whole assembly in place.

At top of the players' league, the cesta will be handmade by a craftsman to the sportsman's personal specification. The overall curve is individual and matched to the player's height and style of play, with a frame of bent chestnut and ribs manufactured from poplar wood. Woven between the ribs is a high impact basket section made from reeds grown and harvested in the Pyrenean mountain region between France and Spain. Some players use as many as fifteen cestas in a season – with most of them undergoing regular repair as the basket weave fractures under the impact of the pelota. At around \$250 the cesta is not a cheap item of equipment – although a production time of some 20 hours brings the labour rate into perspective.

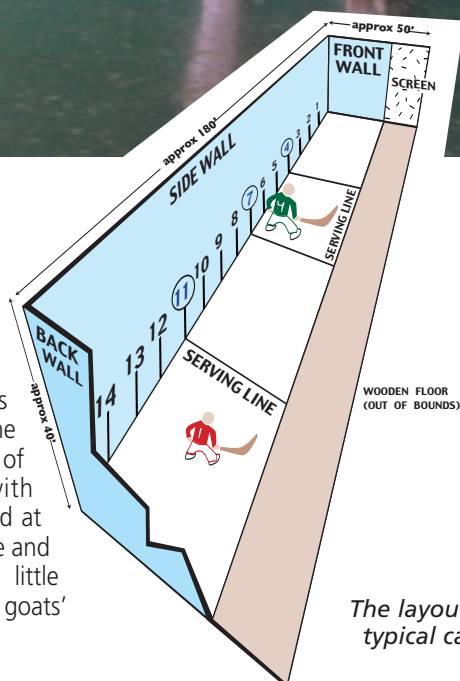
Protective clothing

Helmets have been mandatory since 1968 as protection against the 'kiss' of a speeding pelota, and, together with elbow and hip padding, are the only form of personal protection required. A short-sleeved shirt provides colour to denote the player's position in the cancha. A sash – the faja – that may also denote the position in European games, supports white trousers. Athletic shoes



with maximum grip soles provide traction on both the floor and the walls of the cancha.

Jai alai generates enormous factional loyalties – perhaps indicative of its origins in a society proud of its heritage. In Florida it is the basis of a substantial sector of the gambling industry, with complicated wagers being laid at every stage of the game. Pride and avarice, however, count for little without a good supply of goats' knees. 🐐



The layout of a typical cancha