They Aren't Intimidated

THE MAYAN REBELS

By Erica Block

Mayan women living in rural communities along Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula typically lead fairly isolated lives. Even as women in other parts of Mexico have made economic and social gains, Mayan women in the Yucatán face a number of obstacles when it comes to pursuing an education or career. Gender roles are traditional and circumscribed, and women are discouraged from having hobbies or social lives outside their household and family. In these small rural communities, girls tend to see their lives shrink, rather than expand, as they become women.

Growing up in Yaxuná, a town in the heart of the state of Yucatán, Maria Enedina Canul Poot occasionally snuck out of her house to play games and sports with other kids at a nearby field. The fifty-four-year-old remembers how satisfying it felt to subvert the boys' expectations of her by proving she could play. "I was the only seven-year-old girl in the village who could give them a good game," she explained to *Mexico News Daily* reporter Mark Viales in 2023. Canul Poot took pride in holding her own.

Persuading her mom to let her go outside and play with the boys wasn't easy. "I would argue with her to allow me to play, even though she beat me, but I would do everything possible to convince her to let me go and play," Canul Poot told Viales. "Eventually, she relented."

When Canul Poot reached her early teens, her mom's insistence that she act more feminine became harder to challenge. Eventually, Canul Poot's mother gave Canul Poot an ultimatum: She could either give up playing pickup games outside or risk being thrown out of her family's house.

It's a depressing image: a young, adventurous girl glimpsing the narrow limits of her future. Her life wasn't supposed to include fun. Canul Poot had grown up listening to Yucatán Lions games on the radio and watching men in the community play baseball. But as a woman, she wasn't supposed to pursue this sport she loved.

Fermina Antonia Dzib Dzul grew up in Yaxcabá, another small Mayan community on the Yucatán Peninsula. Growing up in Yaxcabá, Dzib Dzul, who's now forty-four, loved running around outdoors and playing with other kids in the neighborhood. But her mother often forbade Dzib Dzul from playing outside and generally disapproved of her venturing off alone beyond their family's house by herself. Dzib Dzul hated that she had to choose between obeying her mother and playing outside.

Canul Poot's and Dzib Dzul's stories of their mothers discouraging them from participating in sports—and even just recreational play— reflect the sexist attitudes that are deeply ingrained in their Mayan communities. Traditionally, their culture has placed hard limits on what the lives of women can look like. But more recently, those limits have begun to loosen, thanks to a surprising development. Softball, of all things, has become

an unexpected source of empowerment and liberation for Mayan women in the Yucatán, empowering them to challenge their status quo and live fuller, less restricted lives.

It all started back in 2017, when public health officials working for Mexico's Ministry for Social Development (SEDESOL) set up a fitness program in Yaxuná as part of a wellness initiative to combat rising rates of diabetes and hypertension among women in Yucatán state. Canul Poot, whose doctor had recently recommended that she exercise more, was among a dozen or so women participating in the program in Yaxuná. Initially, the government officials proposed aerobics as a cardiovascular activity for the women. Inspired by her childhood interests, Canul Poot suggested a different idea to the group: Why not play softball?

"I'm a sportswoman, so dancing and jumping around just doesn't do it for me," Canul Poot told Viales. "I prefer the atmosphere and camaraderie of competitive team sports.… Baseball is the sport of Yucatán and the game I fell in love with from a young age."

Canul Poot's suggestion resonated with other women participating in the fitness program, and softball became a source of both fitness and camaraderie for women of all ages in the community.

At first, their equipment was makeshift: The women played pickup games with a handmade bat that Canul Poot had carved herself. Sometime later, a local baseball team donated equipment for the women to use, and soon the informal, modified ball game they had been playing several afternoons a week evolved into organized softball practices and scrimmages to refine their skills.

The women's passion for the game kept growing, and, no longer under the guise of a sanctioned public health program, their decision to continue playing softball became an act of defiance. The women ballplayers in Yaxuná chose to call themselves "Las Amazonas," in homage to the female warriors of Greek mythology who were defined by their physical agility, strength, and endurance. "This is what I felt we were: women warriors. I could definitely identify with this name, and I am delighted it stuck," Canul Poot said to Viales.

Meanwhile, about 130 kilometers east of Yaxuná, in the small village of Hondzonot, a group of women who had participated in the same public health initiative as the Amazonas formed a softball team too. The women in Hondzonot decided to call themselves "Las Diablillas" (the Little Devils). They chose the name because they know that their playing softball is inherently a rebellious act.

When the Diablillas or the Amazonas take the field, their aesthetic on the diamond is distinct. Both teams play and practice wearing their chosen uniform: bright-white huipils, which are traditional Mesoamerican garments trimmed with colorful embroidery. Notably, the women prefer to play barefoot, without cleats or shoes.

The Amazonas' unusual and visually distinct uniforms stood out when, in 2019, a tourist exploring the Yucatán recorded a video of Canul Poot hitting a home run. In the video, Canul Poot holds up the skirt of her huipil as she runs around the bases. The home run went viral. The Mayan women who play softball barefoot and compete in huipils gained national and international media attention. No longer unknown, the Amazonas and the Diablillas began to forge connections in the international-sports landscape. They've also inspired women in nearby communities to form their own teams, says Flor Liliana Moo Keb, who plays shortstop for the Amazonas.

"We have seen many towns and villages produce double the number of all-female teams they originally had," Moo Keb told Viales in a 2023 interview for the *Guardian*. "Perhaps softball can now be considered the state sport for women in Yucatán."

PLAY IT FORWARD

While the Diablillas and Amazonas still struggle with resources to finance travel to competitions and improvements to their practice field, they've gained more material support as the teams' notoriety grows. Coverage of Las Diablillas in outlets like the *New York Times* and Meadowlark Media's *Sports Explains the World* documentary series in the last few years have put these women softball players—and the way they are challenging deeply ingrained gender roles in their Mayan communities—on the global map.

In one example of their reach, Stefanía Aradillas, a member of the Mexican Olympic women's softball team and the 2020 National Sports Award winner, visited Hondzonot in 2021 to play a game with the Diablillas. Alejandra Tuz May, the Diablillas' nineteen-year-old catcher, said she wants to follow in Aradillas's footsteps.

Tuz May's goal is not out of reach. Women's softball in Yucatán continues to grow in the wake of teams like the Diablillas and the Amazonas garnering attention in news stories and on social media. At the college level, the Autonomous University of Yucatán (UADY) now has a women's softball team called the Jaguarcitas. And professional opportunities for women to play softball in Mexico are possible, too, with the Mexican Softball League (LMS) kicking off its inaugural season in 2024.

"[Aradillas's] story really touched me," Tuz May told the *Birmingham Times*' Julio Guzmán. "When she was young, she was discriminated against for being a woman in a league, and they wouldn't let her play, even though she was very good."

Not too long ago, a number of players on the Amazonas and Diablillas had never traveled outside their home village or flown on an airplane. But being part of a team and competing as athletes have helped the women on the Diablillas and Amazonas expand their identities beyond the domestic sphere of their households. By playing softball while outwardly expressing pride in their Mayan identity, the women are broadening the possibilities that their daughters and other young Mayan girls can envision when they contemplate their futures.

In July 2022, the Amazonas made history when they participated in the first all-female game to be played in a Mexican Baseball League (LMB) stadium. The game, promoted by the Yucatán government, took place at Kukulcán Alamo Stadium, the Yucatán Lions' home ballpark. Later that year, in a testament to the way the Amazonas have forged connections in the international-sports landscape, a group of Denver Broncos cheerleaders traveled to Yucatán state to play a friendly ball game against the Amazonas. The cheerleaders' trip was part of a program spearheaded by the NFL to drum up further interest in American football in Mexico.

Both teams have forged connections in American pro sports too.

Manuel Rodriguez, a relief pitcher in MLB's Chicago Cubs organization, is the first-ever Mexican player from Yucatán to play in the big leagues. Toward the end of the 2022 MLB season, the Diablillas sent Rodriguez a special gift to represent and celebrate their shared culture. Juana Ay Ay, the captain of the Diablillas, designed and embroidered a Chicago Cubs jersey with Yucatecan designs, the same ones that typically adorn their huipils. In a video posted to Facebook, Rodriguez unboxed the jersey and was visibly moved by the Diablillas' gift and message to him. Rodriguez said the embroidery reminded him of the designs his mom used to stitch into huipils for his sisters. This small example demonstrates the powerful ability of sport to connect people in disparate parts of the world.

Roughly a year after the Diablillas connected with Rodriguez, the Amazonas were invited to play an exhibition game at a major-league ballpark as part of programming for Hispanic Heritage Month: Chase Field, the Arizona Diamondbacks' home stadium in Phoenix. All this would have been unthinkable as recently as 2017, when the women first began playing.

PLAY IT FORWARD

Not only has softball created a sense of community for the women, but it's also opened up a whole world of travel, competition, and diplomatic experiences.

The sports-retail business has taken notice of the Mayan women ball-players too. In September 2023, Champion Athleticwear chose to feature Las Diablillas as part of the company's new global brand campaign, "Champion What Moves You." It might not seem like a lot, but Champion is a multibillion-dollar brand that has outfitted dozens of Olympic athletes and professional teams. Their desire to partner with the Diablillas is a big deal.

But however thrilling it is to partner with a brand like Champion, or to play in a real major-league stadium in the United States, the most essential thing that softball has provided the women is a sense of identity. Playing softball provides members of the Diablillas and Amazonas with another dimension of existence. In rural Mayan communities along the Yucatán Peninsula, women typically need to ask a man—usually their husband or father—for permission in order to leave the house or venture off into public spaces. Alicia Canul Dzib, who plays second base and pitches for Las Diablillas, says playing softball on this team has literally made her world bigger.

"I used to really only leave the house to help my husband with our crops," Canul Dzib said in a 2021 interview with Viales for the *New York Times*. "Now, thanks to softball, I have permission to leave the house, enjoy myself with friends, and visit new towns. It motivates me to keep playing and set an example for my daughter."

Softball has bestowed players on the Diablillas and Amazonas with the agency to experience new places and people. Being part of a team enables the women to be less homebound, and to develop a dynamic identity on top of being a wife and mother. For a number of the players, being an athlete has become an essential piece of their self-concept. The way a number of the women players present on social media illustrates this point.

Most of the women use a softball-related photo as their Facebook or Instagram profile picture—often a shot of game action or an image with teammates in their huipil uniforms.

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On her Facebook page, the Diablillas' Tuz May proudly lists "softbolista" and "catcher #1" in her intro. She categorizes herself as an athlete and includes the quote, "No te dejes intimidar por un poco de poder (Don't be intimidated by a little power)" in the "About" section of her profile. The Amazonas' Thalia Poot Dzib features a candid shot of her pitching, mid-delivery, on her profile. In Spanish, the caption occupying the image reads, "The best

version of me." In another section of Poot Dzib's profile, she says, "Mi pasión es el softbol," and she also gives a shout-out to her teammates on the Amazonas de Yaxunah.

Nearly all the women on both teams maintain social profiles like this, with photos and quotes that emphasize their identity as a ballplayer and athlete.

Before listing basic information like her location or gender, Fermina Dzib Dzul proudly claims, "Soy la capitana de las Auténticas y Verdaderas Amazonas de Yaxunah (I am the captain of the real and true Amazonas of Yaxunah)" on her Instagram profile. And the Diablillas' left fielder Geimi May uses one of her profiles to articulate the lessons she's learned from softball and how playing the sport has enhanced her life:

> *I invest in learning how to work with others and be a good teammate. I invest to learn to deal with disappointment when I don't get what I expected … I invest in learning to achieve my goals. I invest to understand that success doesn't happen overnight.*

The women on the Diablillas and Amazonas range in age from fourteen to sixty-four; many of them are wives and mothers, and some work as herders or seamstresses. But they all can add "ballplayer" to their multifaceted identities. Being an athlete and a woman were once mutually exclusive in Yucatán communities. Now the Amazonas and Diablillas have shown how the two are a perfect—and powerful—match.