

A Basque-American Deep Game: The Political Economy of Ethnicity and *Jai-Alai* in the United States¹

OLATZ GONZÁLEZ ABRISKETA
UNIVERSIDAD DEL PAÍS VASCO - UPV/EHU

Recibido: 4 de octubre de 2017

Aceptado: 27 de octubre de 2017

Abstract: In 1988, a conflict between jai-alai players and fronton owners turned into the longest strike in the history of any American professional sport. This paper addresses the ethnic tensions that characterized the political economy of the jai-alai in the US. On the one hand, it shows that the ethnic character of the sport was maintained due to the economic interests of the companies that managed it. On the other hand, it argues that the political changes in Spain and the Basque conflict influenced not only the mood and ideology of the players, but also their demands and forms of protest, which led to the strike of '88. These circumstances turned the conflict into a deep game, in which both parties risked what they most wanted, and both lost it.

Key words: Anthropology, Political economy, Ethnicity, Jai Alai, Basques.

Resumen: En 1988 un conflicto entre los jugadores de jai-alai y las compañías propietarias de los frontones en EEUU provocó la huelga más larga del deporte profesional americano. Este artículo analiza las tensiones étnicas que han caracterizado la economía política de los jai-alai en este país. Por un lado muestra cómo el carácter étnico del deporte se mantuvo gracias sobre todo a los intereses económicos de las compañías que administraban los jai-alai. Y por otro lado plantea que los cambios políticos en España tras el régimen de Franco y el denominado conflicto vasco influyeron no sólo el ánimo y la ideología de los pelotaris, sino también las exigencias y formas de protesta que dominaron la huelga del 88. Estas circunstancias transformaron el conflicto en un “juego profundo” en el cual ambas partes arriesgaron aquello que más querían y ambas partes perdieron.

Palabras clave: Antropología, Economía política, Etnicidad, Jai Alai, Basques.

¹ I wish to acknowledge the support provided by the Basque Government through its mobility grants (UPV/EHU MOVGV16/04), thanks to which part of the research for this article has been carried out.

But whether Basque or American, These are truly great athletes and Jai Alai is truly a great sport. Artful, skillful, graceful, beautiful. That's the game. Dramatic, exciting, emotional, fun.

That's the experience. Jai-Alai. Those who play it, live it. Those who watch it, love it.

Jai-Alai. There is nothing like it in the world.

"This is Jai-Alai" (1988)

Introduction

1988 marked one of the worst crises in the history of jai-alai, a type of pelota game invented by Basques emigrants in Argentina at the beginning of the 20th century. The players, 85% of whom were Basques, requested recognition of the International Jai-Alai Players Association (IJAPA), an association formed to watch over their interests, check the legality of their contracts, and mediate between the company and the players. Fronton owners, the three of them North American businessmen who controlled all the jai-alais in US, recruited the players and wrote the contracts without any external control, refused to recognize the IJAPA, and began to threaten and use unfair labor practices against the players who joined it, which provoked a strike that lasted three years. This circumstance, together with the expansion and diversification of gambling in the US, marked the beginning of the decline of an industry with a turnover of more than 700 million dollars a year, and which, in 1988, had 14 active frontons in the states of Florida (8), Connecticut (3), Nevada (2), and Rhode Island (1).

This paper addresses the factors that turned a conflict that could have been resolved relatively easily into the longest strike in the history of American professional sport. From a utilitarian point of view, fronton owners and players shared the same interest in running the business, and yet they polarized their positions and strove to defend and maintain their respective claims without considering that it may be detrimental to their own interests. Following Geertz's use of Bentham's deep play, I argue that those who defend their status or their ideological values against their own practical interests are involved in a "deep game." In the case at hand, American fronton owners preferred to make their omnipotence prevail over accepting the legitimacy of the players' request, and Basque workers felt compelled to fight for their ideological morality and ethnic pride at the cost of jeopardizing their main reason for emigrating: money. Both parties risked what they most wanted, and both lost it.

The study of this American-Basque deep game, which had its climax in 1988, allows us to explore the political economy of jai-alai in the US, and to focus on the ethnic tensions that characterized labor relations within the frontons. On the one hand, it shows that the ethnic character of the sport was maintained due to the economic interests of the companies that managed it. They preferred to recruit players from a country like Spain, where labor rights were undeveloped during Franco's regime and workers' foreign status kept them under control. However, the ethnic homogeneity of the players became a real problem for jai-alai owners once these players went on strike. The political changes in Spain and the Basque conflict influenced not only the mood and ideology of the players, but also their demands and forms of protest, which led to the strike of '88.

The polarization between the parties, along with legislative changes related to betting, condemned the jai-alai to a more than likely disappearance in the US. Currently, in 2017, only two frontons remain open, and they do so because of Florida's protectionist legislation, which links casino licensing to the maintenance of the game. The Miami and Dania frontons remain open because this allows their owners to have roulette tables and slot machines. The pelota players, who from the early 50s to the late 80s played in front of 5,000 spectators, nowadays play in front of no more than 50. This decadent panorama is portrayed in the documentary "Jai Alai Blues" (2015), which shows the apogee and the decline of this sport from the nostalgic perspective of those who have lost their mother lode. This is a very different perspective than that of those who saw and produced "This is Jai-Alai" (1988), a nationalistic portrayal of American goodness that promoted the game, while hiding the internal conflicts that existed at that time.

The point of view of the main actors was collected through newspaper articles and personal interviews conducted during 2017. Some of the players who took part in the strike gave me several documents to understand what happened in those years. Especially valuable is the ruling JD-280-89 for the accusation filed by IJAPA against Bridgeport Jai-Alai Inc. for unfair labor practices. The 66-page document, dated November 1989, summarizes the most remarkable testimonies to reconstruct what happened during the year of 1988. It serves as a guide to enter the details of this Basque American deep game.

This is Jai-alai

This is a sport about speed. A rock-hard ball moving faster than any other. Curving, twisting, with treacherous unpredictability. Men with lightning reflexes and ballet like movies. Using overpowering strength or subtle finesse. This is a sport about danger, courageous athletes relying on learned skills and competitive instincts. This is a sport about tradition. Its history dating back centuries. Its form unchanging. This is a sport about emotion, winning and losing, action and reaction. This is a sport about excitement. This is the world's fastest and most exciting sport. This is Jai Alai.²

Basque pelota is a sport that includes several types of games. These vary in terms of the kind of court or fronton where it is played, and the tools used to hit the ball. The best known tools are bare hand, *pala* (paddle), and *cesta-punta* (a long basket), the device utilized in jai-alai, which means “lively fiesta” in the Basque language.

The *cesta-punta* is a wicker basket with a small glove at the end to pull on the hand, which allows the basket to be tied to the wrist. Traditional ball games used similar devices from at least the 16th century onwards. Initially, short leather gloves were used, which were then lengthened to allow the user to throw the ball farther. They started to make them from wicker at the beginning of the 19th century, when the game underwent a radical formal transformation, which provoked its industrialization and expansion around the world. The old long games (*bote luzea*, *laxoa*, and *rebote*), in which one team faces the other, as in tennis, and the wall is out of the bounds of the game, as in paddle, gave way to games played against the wall, in which the opposing players are placed together on the court. In these games, the wall takes a central role, since the ball must bounce on it with each throw, as in squash.

Much larger than the English games, Basque games, especially *pala*, *remonte*, and *xistera* — these last two involving baskets of shorter length and curvature than the *cesta-punta* used in jai-alai, which had still not been invented — acquired great popularity at the end of the 19th century. All the great Spanish cities opened several industrial frontons, with an average of 2,000 spectators per fronton, and the game extended to Latin America, where there were colonies of Basques that had settled there centuries ago. It is precisely in Argentina where a group of players of *xistera* invented the *cesta-punta*. One of them,

² From “This is jai-alai” (1988) documentary film: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FSn5cAX1rY>.

Melchor Guruceaga, injured his arm and adapted the device to be able to continue playing. At first, people criticized this new game for holding back the ball too much. In fact, the traditional game of *xistera* was beginning to be called *joko-garbi* (fair play), as opposed to the new game of *cesta-punta*, which became very popular despite the reluctance and allegations of foul play that fell on it.

The success of *cesta-punta* was such that, in the second decade of the 20th century, there were frontons with cross betting in Mexico, Cuba, Argentina, Uruguay, Chile, Brazil, Italy, Holland, France, Egypt, and China. Victorian morality, which prevailed in the US at that time, turned the attempts to introduce the game into a failure. Dominant values such as austerity and redemption through work did not fit well with gambling, understood as greedy and irrational. First San Francisco (1901) and then New York (1902), Saint Louis (1904), Miami (1924), Chicago, New Orleans, and other major cities failed to carry out projects to implement the game until betting was legalized in some states in 1934.

However, the success of the game in Cuba and Mexico, with several highly profitable frontons in each country, made several entrepreneurs insist on implementing it, mainly in Florida. The Second World War prompted a sharp increase in Florida's population, which had very positive implications for jai-alai. By the early 1940s, Florida — hitherto the least-populated southern state — was host to important naval and air bases of the US Army, as well as to shipyards and arms factories. Hospitals and convalescent homes were built there for the war-wounded. The war industry, which generated the strongest economic growth in US history, also brought professional staff of all kinds, as well as manual laborers, to Florida. This, together with the burgeoning post-war tourist industry, led to the opening of several jai-alai frontons in the 1950s (Dania, Tampa, West Palm Beach, and Daytona).

Another political event that helped to foster the spread of jai-alai in Florida and ensure its success was the Cuban revolution of 1959. In the years following Castro's rise to power, around 200,000 Cubans — many of them wealthy — emigrated to the US, with most choosing to settle in Miami. The Cubans were familiar with jai-alai, which had been widely played on the island for the previous fifty years, and they were quite prepared to visit American frontons in order to indulge their passion for gambling, which was banned by the Castro regime in Cuba. Thenceforth, and until the late '80s, jai-alai flourished to an extent almost unimaginable for a foreign sport; though it never took

root as an American sport, the sixteen professional frontons operating in America by the late 70s were filled to capacity every day.

The Industry of *Jai-alai*

The 15-minute documentary “This is Jai-alai” shows the success of jai-alai and, at the beginning, does not differ from an advertising report that aims to attract audiences to a business that, until that moment, generated around 50 million dollars per fronton per year. From the ninth minute onwards, however, seen from the context of the conflict presented in this article, the data reveal a hidden intention. A voice over explains how the business is managed. It tells us how bonuses are paid to players who win championships at the end of the season, and future contracts depend on the year’s performance, stressing top-level competitiveness in jai-alai, where “maximum effort is not only required but demanded” (00:09:18-00:09:22). It also details the mechanism of an industry that provides “thousands of jobs and valuable tax money to the state coffers” (00:09:28-00:09:33). The voice over insists on control over earned money, and stresses the collaboration between the state and a private company, claiming that jai-alai “is one of the leading industries in Florida, and one of the most popular attractions for tourists and locals alike” (00:09:48-00:09:55).

In 1975, Miami Jai-Alai recorded a record entry of 15,000 spectators in a single day, and between 1976 and 1977 Connecticut opened three frontons: Hartford, Bridgeport, and Milford, raising \$470,979 in bets at the latter on its inauguration (May 5, 1977). In the state of Connecticut, jai-alai became “the largest single component of the state gambling industry, and the most troubled” (Rosenberg), affected by several scandals, including the murder of its owner, Roger Wheeler, in 1981. This circumstance led to a 20% drop in revenues in the early 80s, which recovered and even increased in the middle of the decade. Therefore, with small ups and downs, since 1950 jai-alai had become one of the major betting businesses and an important source of state revenues. “Of each dollar bet, 82 cents returns to the bettor, one cent goes to the city, 5.75 cents to the state and 11.25 cents to the owner” (Rosenberg). Frontons also got benefits from parking and food and liquor concessions.

In the late 80s, the business of jai-alai was at historic highs. According to the data of the Association of Racing Commissioners International collected in the 1994 Statistical Abstract of the United States, the activity of the jai-alai activity between 1980 and 1987 increased

by more than 30% in games, the number of spectators, and money wagered. In 1980, 25,439 games were played, with almost 4 million spectators and 35 million dollars of benefit in government taxes. In 1987, 38,476 games were played, with more than 6.5 million spectators, and a volume of bets of 707.5 million dollars, of which \$51 million went to government taxes. Each fronton earned about \$80 million a year, and spent about 1.5 million to pay the salaries of the players.

The Bridgeport fronton, where the conflict between players and owners began, used a standard contract that was unchanged since the time the fronton opened in 1976. Salaries ranged between about \$20,000 for the lowest paid player to about \$37,000 for the highest paid player. These figures do not include potential prize money, which depends upon the player's level of play, but does include an estimated bonus, which was based on the amount of money wagered during the season. The bonus was estimated to be worth about \$11,000 for the six-month season.

The average monthly salary in Spain at that time was about \$800, and the price of rental housing was about \$200. The purchase of an average flat in the towns from which the majority of players came did not exceed \$20,000. Taking into account that the players paid average rent in the US of \$900 divided between three or four people, and that they had to pay and repair the baskets (about \$400 a month), each jai-alai player saved \$10,000 on average per season.

Despite being a short career, with an average of fifteen years as professional and ten years in the United States, becoming a jai-alai player offered an economic and social status unattainable for most young Basques. In 1988, only half of 28-year-old Spanish youths were independent in domestic terms (Requena). While the average time to pay for a flat was twelve years, most of the jai-alai players could do it in two or three years. Having a house in one's hometown, another one in a summer vacation town, and a sports car was commonplace for a player under 30 who was working in the US in the late 80s.

Nevertheless, jai-alai players felt unhappy about the contracts, which consisted of a simple oath that appealed to the honor of the players and included promising and made them pledge, among other things, "to refrain from participating in strikes and disturbances of any kind of nature" (Nations 7). The same contract allowed the company to terminate the deal at any time and for any external reason that forced them to suspend the game. Players were in the dark about the renewal of their contract until the end of the season, when they were individually called to the general manager's office.

The jai-alai players had requested to change the system of recruitment on numerous occasions during the history of jai-alai in the US. The fronton owners, however, refused to do so. The system of recruitment, individual and by season, gave them absolute control over the players, most of them foreigners, who felt they were in a “situation of permanent insecurity. Only by maintaining a good level of play did they have a chance to stay, when curiously it was the game system *per quinielas* which gave less chance to improve their game.”³ Thus, new shipments of players arrived every year and, of course, the remittances of dismissed workers were also annual” (González Paniego 91).

The 1968 Strike

Jai-alai players’ insecurity, their “condition of foreign workers, and a type of industrial exploitation of the sport oriented to the economic benefit of the entrepreneur” (González Paniego 83), was aggravated by the strike of 1968, a milestone in the consciousness of future generations.

At the end of the 1968 season, the jai-alai players returned to their homes in the Basque Country, and threatened their employers with not coming back the next season if they did not improve their working conditions. Empowered by the fact that the business was based on their performance, players requested salary increases, better insurance, and a percentage of the amount of money wagered (González Paniego 86). Jai-alai was also going through one of its golden ages. The frontons, all of them in Florida, were filled up on a daily basis. Stars of cinema, athletes, and politicians occupied the stands, and were photographed with the players. People asked for the players’ autographs at the exit of the fronton. After the closing of the Cuban jai-alai frontons, those in Florida also attracted the best players, many of them accustomed to more favorable working conditions than in the USA.

The players, recognized figures in both Florida and the Basque Country, considered that it was not possible to start a new season without them, and trusted that the fronton owners would yield to their demands. However, the owners sent the same old offer to the players, with the threat of not renewing the contract of employment, and with it the entry visa to the United States, to those who did not accept it. The players stood firm, and the businessmen took a plane to the Basque Country,

³ The game system *per quinielas* was imposed in US in order to offer quick resolutions and stimulate betting. It comprises a round robin in which the winner of the point stays on the pitch, and a third player enters. For players accustomed to play long matches this system gives no time to get inside the game.

where they began to hire inexperienced young players to replace the best figures in the world. Buddy Berenson, one of the most prominent owners of jai-alai, admitted in the documentary “Jai-Alai Blues” (2015) that the public did not notice the difference. The frontons continued operating all out, and the owners kept control of the situation without making any concession to the players.

All those who did not accept the conditions of the owners did not play in the American frontons until six years later, when one of their mates, Ricardo Sotil Lasa, already as foreman, recovered some of those who were still active for the new fronton in Bridgeport. The opening of three jai-alai frontons in Connecticut started a new golden age of jai-alai.

The Economy of Ethnicity

The documentary “This is jai-alai” echoes this splendor, showing fans of different sexes, ethnicities, and ages, expressing the fascination for the speed and drama of the game. It also exhibits the facilities of the frontons, which have thousands of seats, betting boxes, restaurants, and even shops. Legendary players of the sport like Txurruka, Tximela, Orbea, and Guillermo are listed in a sequence I want to highlight here. “World Jai-Alai has a legacy of greatness,” explains the voice over, “and to continue that into the future, World Jai-Alai maintains an extensive player training program in Spain, France, and even the United States.” At that moment, the documentary shows a map of the United States superimposing upon the two European countries. The image represents the message we consider central in the documentary, and anticipates the great concern of Jai-alai owners at that time: the fact that 90% of the jai-alai players were Basques.

During the production of this documentary, most of the players were on strike to obtain labor improvements, especially the right of association, denied by the companies. The frontons managed to remain open with difficulties. The sessions were filled with replacement players, who were considered scabs, and there were daily picket lines at the entrances of the frontons. The documentary omits this circumstance, and continues to state that, thanks to the schools of the World Jai-Alai in the US, several American players were, at that moment, performing at the maximum level. By interspersing images of training of children with sets of the local figures, it declared that the Americans were bringing a revolution to the old Basque sport, “challenging the Basques in their own game, and winning. It is now evident that the American Jai-Alai players are here to stay.”

This appeal to the nationalistic feelings of the spectator and possible consumer of jai-alai concealed the reality that truly worried owners: there were not enough local players to replace the Basques. During the half-century since jai-alai settled in the United States, fronton owners had not bothered to root the sport among the local population and, when problems arose, they realized that most of the players were still Basques. Jai-alai owners had given priority to their economic interests, hiring foreign players in conditions that would hardly be accepted by local workers.

From the 1968 strike on, the players felt trapped in a double bind (Bateson et al.). What they considered to be the only way to stay active, to play well, no longer ensured a place for the following year. The feeling that the fronton owners could arbitrarily replace even the most emblematic figures if they caused problems or were too expensive made the players feel trapped by a system that, on the one hand, paid them well and, on the other, kept them in permanent job instability. It was only necessary that this feeling of mistreatment would find ideological sediment that would provoke a joint and well-organized action by the players. The socialist and revolutionary ideas of the nationalist left wing, which became the majority creed of the Basque youth in the 70s, offered the discursive and practical framework for this to happen.

Struggle as An Ethical Model

In 1968, when the first of the two most severe jai-alai strikes in the US was called, in the Basque country, the political-military organization *Euskadi ta Askatasuna* (Basque Homeland and Freedom), known by the acronym ETA, committed its first deadly attack. Constituted in 1959, ETA's primary goal was to create an independent Basque state apart from Spain and France.

ETA, whose armed activity ceased in 2011, marked not only Spanish politics but became an influential social phenomenon in the Basque Country. The repression directed by the Franco regime toward everything that could constitute a Basque differential identity, primarily the Basque language Euskera, generated a nationalistic conscience which "did not need to refer to some mythical age, given that repressed social life itself was experienced as foundational, as a founding myth. As social life was experienced as foundational, so the nation was framed as a symbolic project, both national and social, for future generations" (Perez-Agote xxi). "Moderate" Basque nationalism capitalized on the emotional and symbolic fusion between the lived project and the

national construction at the democratic elections. The nationalistic left wing related to ETA, however, mobilized the youth and controlled not only the street and the social movements, but also the discourses around revolutionary being and struggle as a way of life. This dominant ideology attracted thousands of young people, some of whom dedicated their lives to armed struggle. The rest, although not directly related to the violence of ETA, considered that option legitimate. Until the late 1980s, when social support for ETA's actions began to decline, a vast majority of young people subscribed to the political and moral ideals of the nationalistic left wing: Spain was the black beast to fight, and egalitarianism and communalism were the axes of action to face capitalist infamy.

In this context, several strikes occurred in the jai-alai in the US during the 1970s, most of them placated with wage increases. However, the generations of players were changing, and what was paradise for those from the 50s and 60s became a jail for those from the 70s and 80s. For the former, jai-alai meant leaving a country that was economically depressed and repressed by the dictatorship and its conservative Catholic morality. They made a lot of money and lived far from the family and the social control of the small towns from which most of them came. In the US, they enjoyed greater sexual freedom, and every summer returned to the Basque Country, exoticized and flush with money. They could also speak their language freely and without fear of reprisals and, although they had to march to the rhythm of a bullfighting *pasodoble* — a typical Spanish song — every time they went out on the court, the freedom they enjoyed compensated them.

The feeling of privilege began to decline with the generations that came from the mid-70s and especially during the 80s. For them, the *pasodoble* became a real martyrdom. Although it is not possible to speak about a clear and dominant ideology among the jai-alai players, the political conflict in the Basque country affected the fight for their rights. They were not only influenced by the moralizing discourses and the forms of struggle, but the players also felt that they were losing out on something while staying in the USA, and they did not feel the same motivation to emigrate as the previous generations. The dictator Franco was dead, and the revolutionary feeling mobilized most of the youth. The archetype of the young Basque, previously incarnated by the pelota player, was now incarnated by the *borrokalari*, the fighter. The hero was no longer the man who excelled in the fronton, in the town's plaza, but the man who took to arms, the one who figuratively fought

in the mountains or the streets for the freedom of Euskal Herria, the Basque people. Euskal Herria called its young people in line, and many of them felt uncomfortable for not coming to their homeland's call. As the "Kalera, Kalera" ("To the streets"), a song which was clandestinely composed in the late 70s and was part of a repertoire of vindication and appeal to the revolutionary struggle that people sang in unison at traditional fiestas and gatherings of all kinds, states:

*Altxa begiak, zabaldu orok
deiadarra lagunari
berriro izanen gaituk libre
indar emanaz iraultzari.*

Look up, transmit
the call to your comrade,
We will be free again
Giving strength to the revolution.

*Kalera, kalera, borrokalari kalera,
kalera, kalera, borrokalari kalera,
hire indarraren beharra diagu
gure indarrarekin batera
hire indarraren beharra diagu
gure indarrarekin batera.*

To the street, to the street, to the street, fighter,
To the street, to the street, to the street, fighter,
We need your strength
Next to ours,
We need your strength
Next to ours.

*Zai dago ama, zai aita
zai andre ta lagunak
hator, hator Euskadira,
hator, hator etxera.*

Your mother awaits you, your father awaits you,
Your wife and your friends are waiting for you
Come, come to Euskadi,
Come, come home.

Joseba Zulaika points out that "anyone actively engaged in Basque culture and politics could not receive more honorable entitlement than being a *burrokalari*" (183). The *borroka* or *burruka* (fight), along with the *joko* (game) form of polarized competitive frames in which most Basque men are socialized, is "crucially relevant for understanding people's political outlook and for describing the generation of the ongoing violence" (Zulaika 169). If *burruka* refers to a spontaneous struggle between young men, *joko* "is a competitive game, one in which two or more opponents confront one another with a single objective: to win" (González Abrisketa 169). Almost always linked to a bet, in Basque games there is no place for a tie: the outcome always has to offer a definitive and conclusive result. The disjunctive or mutual exclusion approach, involving both *burruka* and *joko*, leaves no room for plural arrangements or mediating elements. One has to win. The other loses.

The jai-alai players knew that a struggle in antagonistic and disjunctive terms could only have disastrous consequences for them. The "we or they" logic of the *burrukas* between foreigners and locals in

the town's fiestas and the "neither...nor..." logic of the independence discourse was not translatable to a context in which all the parties were indispensable and were obliged to reach an agreement. The functioning of the jai-alai industry needed them all. However, the events quickly led to polarized reasoning in which each side became the other's enemy.

The Jai-alai Trial

The "Jai-alai Trial" was the title of a three-page document that, on February 7, 1988, Pedro Olarreta read to his fellows of the Bridgeport's roster, and sent to the rest of the jai-alai frontons to start the struggle for their rights as workers. The document begins by recalling the spectacular and beautiful nature of a game which spread throughout the world, and then immediately appeals to the "severe crisis that this sport undergoes today, and its difficulties facing the future," which he relates to the immorality of betting. Olarreta considers that the player is unhappy, and that the "conformist nonconformity of the pelota player shows his lack of improvement in this severely damaged sport." Remembering the 1968 strike, he criticizes the commercialization of the game, with nine weekly functions and eleven months of play a year, which translates into the lack of respect towards the player, and his reduction to a mere number for the viewer.

In the letter posted to the players, he encourages them to recognize the decadence of the game, to look to the future, to meet, to establish statutes, and to carry out a collective action — thereby breaking the contract — to force the owners to improve their situation. Finally, Pedro Olarreta sets a deadline for his demands:

From February 15, I start to reduce my food, and on the 20th, I declare myself on indefinite hunger strike. By the last day of the month, all contracts have to be broken, and on day 1, we must be paid double. Otherwise, we will not go out to play.

Despite the fact that no direct affiliations can be established between the jai-alai players and the left-wing movement in the Basque Country, this call for mobilization includes elements that remind us of appeals and modes of vindication linked to the armed struggle (*Borroka armatua*). On the one hand, the document differentiates the honesty of the players from the immorality of the betting, and by metonymical extension of the fronton owners who stimulate it and the public that only comes to jai-alai seeking to win money. This Manichean analysis of jai-alai recalls

the purely antagonistic ethos that is typical of the Basque political framework. In Joseba Zulaika's words, "Once a worldview split into positive and negative, sticking stubbornly to the positive side becomes imperative" (183). The conviction of being in possession of a clear moral superiority promotes these scenarios of polarization, in which agreement is hardly attainable.

On the other hand, the reference to the hunger strike in the document seems to be out of context, but it becomes very understandable if we relate it to the political process in Euskadi. At the end of the 1980s, hunger strikes were frequent methods of protest by ETA prisoners against penitentiary policies both in Spain and France, but they were minorities in the context of labor struggles such as jai-alai's. Pedro Olarreta's threat of starting a hunger strike, a form of struggle that responds traditionally to a situation of political repression, demonstrates the influence that the Basque conflict had on the imagination of the jai-alai players.

However, the most significant expression of cultural idiosyncrasy is the ultimatum Pedro Olarreta puts forward at the end of the document: a claim that any Basque would qualify as an *hordago*. An *hordago* is the voice used in the card game called *mus* to make a definite bet of all or nothing. Unlike the progressive accumulation of points, the *hordago* allows winning the game in a single play. If the opponent accepts the *hordago*, this involves putting the cards in the open to see who has the winning play and therefore wins the game. In his analysis of the cultural models that made armed struggle possible, Joseba Zulaika considers the *hordago* as a key model for understanding the mentality that sustained Basque political violence.

What *mus* teaches Basque men for hours on end is the premise that marking the result of a gradual process can always be offset by the economy of an *hordago*. By allowing *hordago* solutions, *mus* assumes that sudden, partial, arbitrary acts are more decisive than the progressive summation of a process (178).

The *mus*, universally played in the Basque country, was a leisure activity that jai-alai players enjoyed in the long free hours during their stays in the US. Pedro Olarreta knew that an *hordago* is only thrown to gain time before a game that is almost lost, or when you have a winning play that the opponent does not expect. Otherwise, an *hordago* at the wrong time can ruin the game. The demand for a doubling of the salary, something that the fronton owners would have never accepted,

indicates that Pedro Olarreta had the first option in mind. He throws an unacceptable *hordago* to gain time and measure the opponent's forces.

The Events of 1988

What Pedro Olarreta did not expect was the almost unanimous agreement of the players. 97% of them adhered to the document, modifying some of its parts. However, Pedro Olarreta did not begin a hunger strike, and on the recommendation of Olarreta himself, he was the only one that broke the contract. Moreover, the doubling of the salaries was no longer mentioned beyond the first document. Once a certain unity of action was evident, the only explicit request of the jai-alai players was the recognition of the IJAPA. On March 7, 1988, the IJAPA wrote to the companies claiming recognition on the basis that a majority of players had signed authorization cards.

The company replied in a letter, dated March 10, 1988, stating:

Bridgeport Jai-Alai, Inc absolutely refuses to recognize any so-called 'association' that claims to represent our players. You call this group an 'association'. What you really mean is that you are trying to form a union. You also know as well as I do that any players who signed 'authorization' cards did so without a full, complete knowledge of the facts. I question whether anyone explained to them the full legal significance of their signatures, or of the serious disadvantages of union membership. We put no credence in those cards. Aside from assuring you that we will use any and all legal means to resist this union, we have nothing further to discuss. Any other communications should be directed to our attorneys.

This was the position held by the companies from the beginning to the end of the conflict. They refused to accept that the players had already formed into an association. American businessmen, probably accustomed to the arbitrariness of labor rights in Franco's Spain, and with the experience of absolute control and impunity that this gave them in the strike of 1968, failed to understand that things had changed. They felt that the savages who they had helped "to descend from the mountains" had now merely another outburst of rebellion, which could be solved by asserting authority.

On February 29, when the jai-alai players were still playing, Bridgeport General Manager, Paul Weintraub, according to his testimony, had "a meeting with the players to clear the air" (Nations 11). He questioned

the association, calling it “a fancy way of saying ‘union,’” and told the players that “forming a union — or ‘association’ — would be among the worst things that ever happened to this fronton.” The rejection of the IJAPA by the fronton owners was surprising, taking into account that the rest of the jai-alai workers — pari-mutuel clerks, restaurant and lounge employees, ushers, cleaners, and others — had been affiliated with unions since 1977.

Weintraub considered the association useless because each player had already signed written contracts negotiated with them. These contracts had not changed for decades. The players’ attorney, Robert Cherverie, called them “yellow dog” contracts, outlawed since the 1930’s, and it is evident in the JD-280-89 ruling that they contained abusive clauses, including an oath pledging the players to refrain from going on strike. These provisions were contrary to the legal frameworks of the time, and infringed on one of the fundamental rights of workers: their right to form a union, and to go on strike which, according to previous case law, was the only means workers had to fight against bosses’ threats and abuses of power.

In the case of jai-alai, the impunity with which fronton owners threatened the players with layoffs, deportation, replacement, and other punitive measures became obscene. On March 24, after 92% of jai-alai players in the US responded to the threats with a strike authorization vote, Weintraub posted a note on the players’ bulletin board leaving a written record of the threats, and including a new one: “a possible lawsuit for damages against any player refusing to play.”

This new threat was formulated, in the Judges’ opinion, “to restrain employees in their exercise of Section 7 rights to form a union and to go on strike.” However, the players did not know the laws, and feared reports to all that refused to play, since, in their contracts, it was expressly indicated that they could not initiate a strike. Pedro Olarreta had been sued for breach of contract. In fact, he had been the first jai-alai player in history to be reported, and decided to leave the US at the end of March. Fear of denunciation was compounded by the fear of expulsion from the country, a ghost that had been hovering since the 1968 strike, when all the players had to remain in the Basque country because the company did not process their visas. Without an employment that called for the H-1 visa, the person was subject to deportation. However, in the 1970’s the immigration law was changed, and the change allowed striking aliens to remain in the country throughout the duration of a strike if a strike certification was obtained.

Tension grew as jai-alai companies issued threats, and players demanded fidelity to their comrades. In April, the baskets of one of the Bridgeport jai-alai players who was outside of the association were found broken, and the company blamed the rest of the players. In the Newport jai-alai, the company had told its players to bring back their airline tickets, and access to the fronton had been restricted when they wore their union hats and T-shirts. In Tampa, World Jai Alai suspended a player wearing a union hat. In Hartford, a newcomer did not get a contract because he joined the Union. Something similar happened in Orlando, where a contract was not given to a player because he was an officer of the Union. In Florida, players were being transferred from one location to another, and they were interrogated. Faced with this climate of tension in the frontons, the IJAPA representatives decided to go on strike.

Bringing the Deep Game to a Close

The strike was called on April 14. Only three players remained, one of them a figure from the 1968 strike. On April 15, Weintraub, the Bridgeport general manager, sent a letter to all the players stating that they were to be replaced as quickly as possible, and asked the responsible players not to listen to the union leaders, and to go to the fronton to play. Companies searched everywhere to find replacements. Everyone who owned a *cesta* (basket) was allowed on the fronton's court for a tryout. By April 20, Bridgeport reopened the fronton with 35 players characterized as permanent replacements. The fronton was again closed on April 25 by the Connecticut Division of Special Revenue for public safety reasons. Strikers remained at the entrance of the fronton with banners preventing the public from entering the interior.

A couple of years earlier, in a strike of pari-mutuel employees, the state refused to issue licenses to replacement workers. In the case of the jai-alai players, however, the state reconsidered its prior ruling, and decided to allow the company to reopen on June 16 with replacement players. The fronton ran until its assigned closing date of June 25. Bridgeport Jai-Alai Inc. extended a contract to the players for the 1989 season. Thirty-seven of these contracts were signed by replacement players, and only three by previously striking players.

On June 30, the IJAPA made an unconditional offer to return to work, which the company responded to on September 6, stating that they did not recognize the association as the bargaining agent of anyone at Bridgeport Jai Alai. The company sent individual letters to

seventeen players, the more active ones, telling them that permanent replacements had been hired in their positions, and no openings were available to them at this time. However, they would place their name on a preferential rehiring list if they were interested. The remaining players on strike (22) were sent a letter informing them that a job was presently available for them at the fronton.

All of the players on strike responded that they would accept employment. However, they did not come in, and were replaced about two weeks before the season started. The players were contacted again, and were explained that the company would delete any mention of strikes, concerted activity, and conspiracy from the contracts, so that nothing “should be construed to limit or infringe in any way on any rights you may have under law to engage in lawful, protected, concerted activity.”

Three players of forty crossed the picket line in that moment, none of them Basque. The strikers sent out another unconditional offer to return to work. The company again denied that the IJAPA had the authority to speak for any Bridgeport player. Players insisted on talking to the contractors as an association, but the companies rejected the idea and insisted on talking to them as individuals.

On November 28, 1989, Bridgeport Jai-Alai Inc., was sentenced for engaging in unfair labor practices that provoked the strike. The judges ordered its officers, agents, successors, and assigns to desist from threatening that they would never recognize the union, from requiring its players to sign illegal clauses, from refusing to offer reinstatement and to continue the salaries, as well as four more commands. Moreover, as a remedy, the company had to reinstate all players to their former positions, and pay all their salaries and bonuses with interest.

The company appealed the ruling, and the strike lasted until April 14, 1991, when the parties reached an agreement. The companies recognized the IJAPA, and Bridgeport Jai-Alai Inc. reinstated the players and paid them \$120,000 each. They distributed the money based on the months each of them was in the picket line. Some of them had maintained the protests on a daily basis throughout three years, even in the winter of Connecticut. Others had left the struggle, and returned to the Basque Country. Everyone was tired, including the spectators. They had to confront the picket line at the entrance of the frontons every time they went to jai-alai. Furthermore, in the court, the players were much worse than the ones whom they had previously become accustomed to. In addition to that, there were new opportunities for betting, with faster resolution and greater prizes.

In October 1988, Native Indians were granted the right to open betting shops and casinos on their reservations, while, at the same time, the state lottery started up. The world of gambling expanded and diversified, while American businessmen and Basque pelota players were engaged in their own particular deep game.

Currently, two frontons offer games throughout the year: the legendary Miami Jai Alai, and the Dania Beach Jai Alai, which recently turned part of the large stadium into rooms with slot machines. They are unlikely ever to be reused for jai-alai. In the event of a change of the legislation that now protects jai alai in Florida, the Basque players who are still in America would have to return home, bringing the history of jai alai in the United States to a close.

Works Cited

- Bateson, Gregory, Don D. Jackson, Jay Haley, & John Weakland. "Toward a theory of schizophrenia." *Systems Research and Behavioral Science* 1.4 (1956): 251-64.
- Geertz, Clifford. "Deep play: Notes on the Balinese cockfight." *Daedalus* 134.4 (2005): 56-86.
- González Abrisketa, Olatz. *Basque pelota: a ritual, an aesthetic*. Translated by Mariann Vaczi. Center for Basque Studies Press, 2012.
- González Paniego, José Ignacio. "Pelotaris vascos en América: Conflictos laborales delos puntistas profesionales en los EEUU. 1968-1996." *Sancho el sabio: Revista de cultura e investigación vasca* 9, (1998): 81-104.
- Nations, Wallace H. National Labour Relations Board Division of Judges. *JD-280-89*. Bridgeport, CT, 1989. Nov 18, 1989.
- Pérez-Agote, Alfonso. *The social roots of Basque nationalism*. Center for Basque Studies Press, 2006.
- Requena, Miguel. "Juventud y dependencia familiar en España." *Revista de estudios de juventud* 58.2 (2002): 12-24.
- Rosenberg, John S. "Gaming Industry Growth Doubtful." *The New York Times*, August 16, 1981, <http://www.nytimes.com/1981/08/16/nyregion/gaming-industry-growth-doubtful.html>.
- Statistical Abstract of the United States*. U.S. Government Printing Office, 1994.
- Zulaika, Joseba. *Basque Violence: Metaphor and Sacrament*. University of Nevada Press, 2000.

Filmography

Bilbao, Gorka. *Jai-alai Blues*. Berde produkzioak, 2015.

Hoegstrom, Jon. *This is Jai-Alai*. World Jai-alai, 1988, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FSn5cAXx1rY>.