



Everyone ready to hit the 'hole?

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Even if you're already familiar with this popular party game, you probably haven't heard its official name, a name so vulgar that when I first Googled it, I was directed to a porn site.

Maybe you know it as the beanbag game. It's also been dubbed bags, satchels and slopes. My personal favorite is bizzle bags.

Whatever the name, the game remains the same: launch your sack, aim for the box and sink it in the hole - cornhole, that is.

Cornhole - or beanbag, depending on what it's called in your neighborhood - is the backyard game with the dirty name, born out of good, clean fun. It's easier than horseshoes, safer than lawn darts, and the vulgar innuendos are entirely optional. Anyone can play - old, young, male or female. It doesn't require special skills or athletic ability. All you need is a free hand to toss a one-pound sack of corn - and preferably another hand free to firmly grasp a 12-ounce beverage.

It has become so popular at BBQs, block parties, tailgate events, bars and any type of outdoor gathering that, chances are, you've already come across this game. Every friend or family get-together I've attended over the past few years has had cornhole boards set up somewhere.

The basics

Set up two bean bag boards (boards built at a slant with large holes cut out of the middle) at a distance of 27 feet apart from the fronts of each box.

Each team has two players standing opposite one another, next to an opposing player. The players on one side take turns throwing four bags each, intent on landing their bags somewhere on the board or in the hole (a bag on the board earns one point; one in the hole equals three points). Points can be canceled out, so whichever team banks the most points in each round wins the first throw for the next round. The first team to reach 21 is the winner.

Sounds simple enough, right? Sure, it's easy enough to toss the bags, but they don't always land where you aim them. Everyone's got their own technique. Usually, a couple of semi-pro cornholers remain permanently stationed at the boards. (Most likely, they'll pair up and proceed to wipe out every challenging team. And naturally, their drinks are continually refilled by the losing teams; thus, they never have to leave their posts.)

The roots of cornholing

Ask around and you'll hear a thousand tales about the very first cornhole game. One Web site mentions the possibility of ancient German roots, while another features blogs about so-and-so's grandpa introducing the game to him back in 1970-something. Heck, I remember playing something similar at school fun fairs back in third grade.

Though many have claimed fame for inventing this now-popular bar and lawn game, the point of origin given the most credence these days is Cincinnati. It is rumored that a few beer-drinkin' boys with too much time on their hands started tossing corn-filled sacks into a hole, and eventually, this bag-throwin' contest drifted into the Chicago area.

Perhaps we should give credit to Mark Smyth and Dave Abell for contributing to the surge in cornhole's popularity here in the Chicago suburbs. Smyth and Abell were born and reared in Cincinnati, where cornholing is practically a way of life.

According to Smyth, when they moved to Chicago nearly eight years ago and continued to cornhole like they did back home, they realized it hadn't become firmly established in the Chicago area. They created Backyard Players, LLC, "the original organizer of backyard-style games and leagues," to promote and organize fun games that can be enjoyed by anyone, anytime, anywhere.

ChicagoCornhole (www.chicagocornhole.com), Backyard Players' premiere offering, teaches the amateur bagger everything he or she needs to know to play the game, including official rules and regulations, tips on technique, and information about tournaments and sponsorship. They even offer a ChicagoCornhole lingo tutorial: a 'cornhole' is a bag in the hole, worth three points; a 'cow pie' is a bag on the board, worth one point; a 'Slick Willie' is a bag that slides into the hole; and a 'Sally' is a toss that lands short of the board.

"The game is hot right now; it's taking off," Smyth says. He thinks cornhole is great for bars because it's fun and engaging and it brings people in on a consistent basis. ChicagoCornhole currently runs leagues at The Cubby Bear and JOE's Sports Bar in Chicago.

As cornhole's popularity continues to grow, more and more bars have been picking up on the trend and are offering their patrons free play or even hosting tournaments. Several bars throughout the suburbs featuring patios or open rooms have cornhole boards available for play.

The Cubby Bear in Lincolnshire has outdoor cornhole tournaments every Wednesday starting at 8 p.m. Participation is free and prizes usually include a \$50 gift certificate. Occasionally, they'll offer Cubs or Sox tickets as prizes for the winners.

Durty Nellie's in Palatine hosts cornhole tournaments on Thursday nights. The buy-in is \$25, with sign-up available between 7:30 and 8:30 p.m. Because the tournaments take place outside on the upstairs patio, participants also have access to the bands that play. The tournaments begin at 9 p.m. and cash prizes are awarded to the winners.

Other baggo hot spots include North Beach in Downers Grove, Sideouts in Island Lake and the Beacon Tap in Des Plaines.

Certainly, cornhole has attracted quite a following, spreading from Cincinnati throughout the Midwest to Chicago and its suburbs. According to Smyth, the game

is pretty much the same here as it is in Ohio. "The length of the boards is a little different here...and the name is something people are still getting used to." Most people around Chicago call it bags, but the Backyard Players grew up playing cornhole and want to keep that tradition going.

Primetime cornholing

So, what's in store for the game of cornhole?

"I'd love to see a national cornhole tournament on ESPN," said Smyth, laughing. He thinks the prospect is hysterical. Sure it is; just imagine how funny it would be to turn on the TV and hear the announcers talking about cornhole, using some of the official lingo such as 'Slick Willie' or 'cow pie.'

For now, cornhole is one of the most popular and rapidly growing yard and bar games around Chicago. It's fun and easy for everyone. You can play over and over and never get tired or injured. It's a great game for socializing, and you really can't get upset about losing. So kick back and relax, grab a beer and a bag, and throw some 'hole.

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