



SPORTS
GUYS



BY KURT SMITH

Beyond the Parking Lot

Cornhole is among the most popular pastimes for tailgaters, but it's become much more than that... it's a genuine professional sport, played in arenas and televised. It's also one of the few entities in the country that actually benefited from the pandemic.

You can write for *JerseyMan Magazine* and attend Legacy Club events for a decade, and almost never see publisher Ken Dunek animated enough to shout loudly and pump his fist.

Then again, you don't see many people gain a lead against John Kitchin in a cornhole match, however short-lived that lead may be until Kitchin finds his bearings and starts effortlessly nailing throws. It's understandable for even a reserved person to be

thrilled at the achievement.

This curious anomaly occurred at the Infinity Club Cornhole Tournament, held this summer at the PCS facility in Moorestown, NJ. The event raised nearly \$4,000 for the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society, and for survivor T.J. Smink's bid for the Society's Man or Woman of The Year.

Of course, many esteemed Legacy Club members were present. It's an ideal opportunity to avenge a recent

Kitchin

defeat on the golf course. No one tanks, of course, but a loss isn't so bad...it's an opportunity to grab a drink and catch up with fellow members.

One would think that, in a crowd of Eagles fans, who have to have considerable tailgating experience, there would be some players standing out in the crowd. But other than Smink's team, who prevailed in the match, most of them were unexceptional shooters. Even by frequent tailgater standards.

The tournament was for fun and to help less fortunate people. PCS's parking lot is obviously no billion-dollar, luxury box-filled venue.

But cornhole has grown well beyond the parking lot.

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PRESENT AT THE GATHERING were Kitchin, a national cornhole pro who resides in West Deptford, and Joe Harsh, the American Cornhole League's (ACL) Northeast Conference Director.

Yes, there is a nationwide cornhole league. As seen on TV.

Before 2020, the ACL had already landed some national television deals, and events could be seen on various sports networks. Then they got a boost...professional cornhole became one of the rare entities that benefited

from an outbreak. With no baseball, football, basketball, hockey, etc., there was a fairly ginormous hole in sports broadcasting to fill.

So cornhole moved into seriously choice TV slots. Harsh notes that "We had eight to ten broadcasts on Saturdays, prime time with our Pro Division, and traveled all over the country.

"We're really fortunate," he adds. "Everything went well for us. And the exposure and the growth, it's been really, really beneficial to the league.

"I've known John for a couple of years now,

With no baseball, football, basketball, hockey, etc., there was a fairly ginormous hole in sports broadcasting to fill.

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and the fact that someone would ask John for an autograph, it's the coolest thing."

Kitchin has been known to drive to Cincin-



ESPN cornhole broadcaster Jeff McCarragher

Photo courtesy Jeff McCarragher

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Smink Strong

T.J. Smink, who won the Infinity Club Cornhole Event with his partner Kyle Reider, had personal reasons for both winning and co-arranging the event: he is a cancer survivor.

Smink is a Senior Account Executive for Premium Seating with the Philadelphia Union. But in 2020, the shutdown of sports was the least of his worries. In December of 2019, he was diagnosed with stage four Hodgkin's lymphoma.

He decided to control two things that he could control: his hair and his attitude. He shaved off the hair he felt he was going to lose from treatments...but ultimately didn't. And he kept upbeat, all the time.

"I made sure to keep a positive attitude, to look on the bright side of life. Having that mindset, being able to say I'm going to beat this s***, that was way more than half the battle."

Legacy Club member Devin DiNofa, at the time campaigning to be the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society's Man or Woman of The Year, reached out to Smink.

"He's an awesome dude," Smink says. "He asked if I would be on his team to help raise money for others. Even then, he wanted to work with LLS to raise funds for me directly. LLS said we can't go towards one specific person.



Smink

"Even then, I went back and told him, I'm killing this s***. We're good, I appreciate it, but I would prefer it goes to someone who actually needs the funding."

Today Smink, at DiNofa's urging, is campaigning for the LLS Man or Woman of The Year himself. The Infinity Club Cornhole event was a part of that, to great success.

"Ash [Ashley Dunek] came up with the idea of working one of the Infinity Club events into a fundraiser. And we had a really big turnout. There were 32 teams and a lot of people that came just to hang out.

"Our team is going to get a research portfolio named after us. I'm excited to see where that research goes."

And he and Kyle Reider topped it all with a cornhole tournament win.



Harsh

"That's the coolest part. You can see him on TV on the weekend, and then Monday or Tuesday night you could literally play against him."

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nati for the day to throw bags. At least, that became a thing for him when someone noticed he was a pretty good shot at tailgates.

"I played in the parking lot of Eagles and Phillies games, and a guy came to me and said, 'Hey, we have a league for this.' I kind of laughed at him. Here I am seven years later, and if I could play more I would."

Indeed, Kitchin started playing in a league and did well enough to compete in local tournaments. Then he became a pro. Then an ACL Pro.

He's added some impressive achievements to his league bio: #1 Northeast Conference player in 2018, ACL Man of The Year in 2019, and a 2nd place finish in the 2020 USA Cornhole Club Championships – broadcast on NBC

Sports – to name just a few. He's so good that Bush's Baked Beans and LG put their logos on his jersey.

You can see why even Dunek would celebrate well beyond his typical demeanor scoring a lead against him. Which, to Kitchin and Harsh, is part of the appeal...anyone can play, even against the pros.

"I play in leagues around here all the time," Kitchin says. "I play pretty well, but there's a lot of people who, when they play against me, they use that as a measuring stick. I don't beat everybody, so I think that makes them even more interested...That guy's been on TV!"

"That's the coolest part," Harsh adds. "You can see him on TV on the weekend, and then Monday or Tuesday night you could literally play against him."

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JEFF McCARRAGHER IS a freelance sports broadcaster. His LinkedIn profile describes his most recent position as a "Play-by-Play Announcer for College Football & Basketball...and yes, Cornhole too." His resume covering other sports is impressive, but by almost any measure, McCarragher is the Voice of American Cornhole.

He landed the gig by simply being in the right place at the right time. Literally.

A South Carolina resident, he worked col-

lege football and basketball throughout the Carolinas. Tupelo Raycom, the company that brought him announcing work, had an office there. And they knew ESPN needed a cornhole announcer.

"When COVID hit, being a freelance play-by-play broadcaster was like being a waiter or server at a restaurant," he remembers. "We were shut down immediately because all the sports just went away. When they got the contract on ESPN, they called me and said, 'Hey, are you willing to travel if we put together cornhole through the summer?'"

"I had done a little bit for them in the past, I'd done the national college cornhole championships that previous New Year's. I said, 'Absolutely, I'm comfortable traveling.' And so away we went, ESPN signed a deal with the American Cornhole League."

McCarragher's enthusiasm for covering cornhole, of all things, is palpable. The players may not have toiled through college or minor leagues, but they definitely have well-developed skills.

"It's a very simple sport, right? You just slide it up the board and put it in the hole. But just like any other sport, when you get to a very high level, you start to learn how technical it is. I had to learn a whole new vernacular, whether it's replacement bags or grab bags,

So You Want To Be A Pro Cornhole Player?

In a write-up about John Kitchin from Power Equipment Direct's website, he is described as a professional cornhole player who "practices for roughly 32 hours per week, where he throws 2,000 to 3,000 bags."

While that is probably technically true, Kitchin doesn't exactly work in his garage, perfecting his follow-through and stance and watching himself on video. He just plays a lot, which to him is the simple secret to improvement.

"When you figure in going to leagues and playing tournaments on the weekends and then throwing it in my shop or something like that, the amount probably adds up. I play in the leagues on Tuesday nights and Wednesday nights, and Thursday nights usually, where I try to get out too.

"If you want to become a better cornhole player," Kitchin continues, "just get out and play, go find a local league. Even if it doubles as a night out, you know, go out and play. You've just got to get throws in, and if you can't and you just throw in the backyard, go out and throw. You have to throw bags.

"So practice for a pro, to me, would be going out and playing in your own league and it's all about getting throws in."

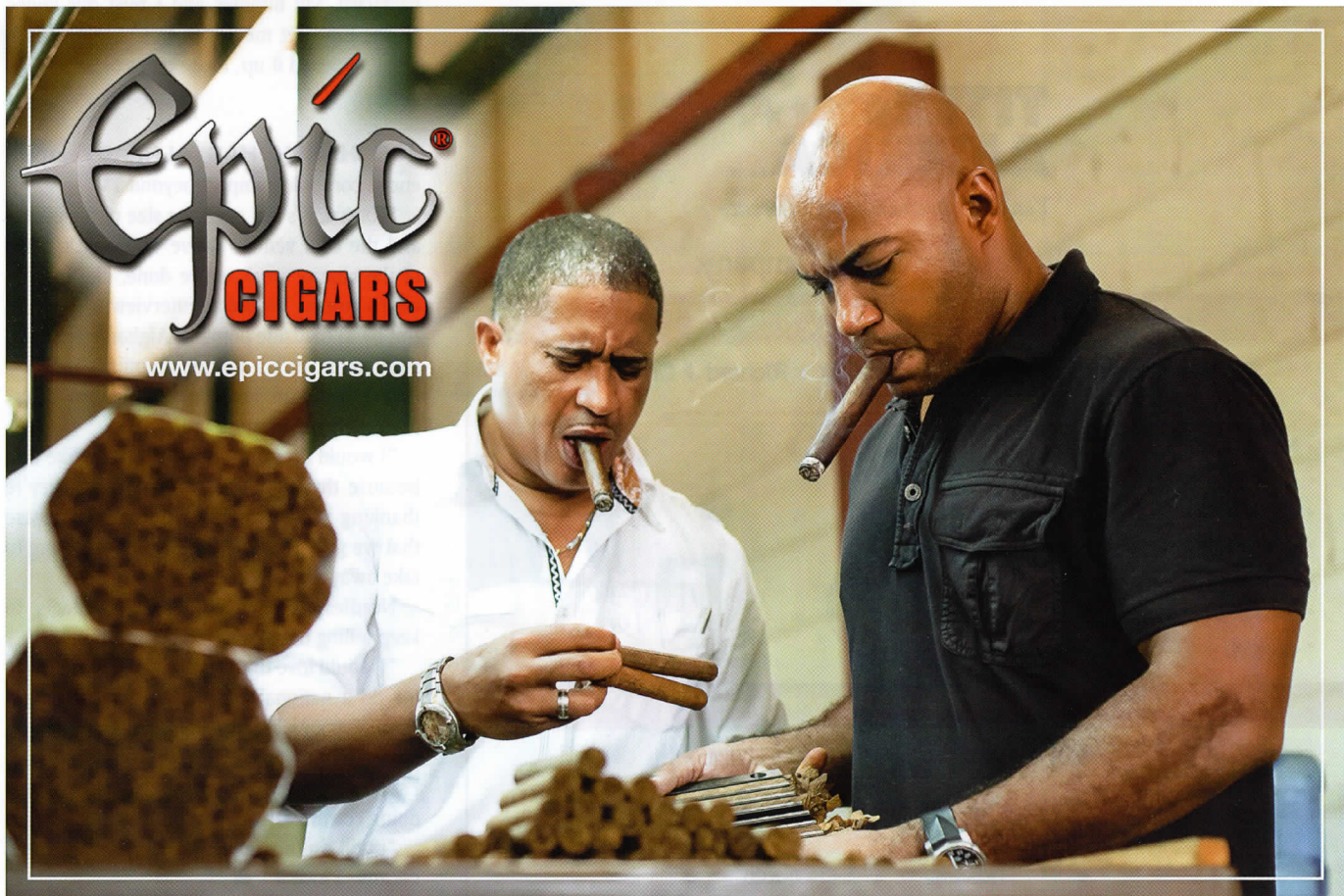
Wait, no proper ways of holding the bag? No commentary on wrist movement? Nothing about how to warm up? Kitchin says that once you find a groove that works for you, the mental aspect is far more important. And that part can't always be taught.

"I'm probably the worst pro to talk about this because I'm a firm believer of under-thinking. People overthink. It's whatever is most comfortable to you, you just have to tweak that. Throw eight bags, and I would want to see how you threw. And I would say, was that comfortable? If that's comfortable for you, you can tweak it from there."

That sounds simplistic, but he's right. Cornhole players lose matches overthinking.

"I might throw 50 bags in a row in the hole, but what changes from the time that you just threw 50 bags in a row and then you line up next to me? What just changed? Nothing changed, except for your mental, so you're overthinking it. Now all of a sudden that same guy who's just hit 50 bags in a row off to the side warming up, is now maybe two on two in. It's the overthinking."

"I try not to worry about all that."



the way a player collects the bag.

"I relate it to being a really good major league pitcher. He's got his fastball, his slider, his cutter, his changeup. The ones who play at the top level, they've got a little cut shot, they've got an airmail shot. They can make the bag curve one way or another, they can angle it and get the bag to kind of roll. Instead of different pitches, they have different technical shots that they can throw. It's really pretty amazing."

There's considerable tension in big matches, too.

"It gets to be like golf," he continues. "You've got a two-stroke lead, or maybe a one-stroke lead, going into the 72nd hole on Sunday. I don't care who you are. That final tee shot on the 18th? It has to be good. There's so much pressure. Again, I get it, it's cornhole. We're not talking about The Masters. But it's still competitive, the desire to win for these players."

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McCARRAGHER IS CONFIDENT that cornhole's growth will continue, even with the return of other spectator sports.

"Did COVID help give it added exposure? Absolutely. But I will tell you, they have been working behind the scenes with these little ESPN contracts now for several years. They were on ESPN a few times in 2018-2019. We had

Why We Cheer - The Human Interest Stories

The ACL is fortunate to have Jeff McCarragher behind the microphone because he does what the best broadcasters do: he tells backstories about the participants.

He shared a few everyman stories of cornhole stars with JerseyMan Magazine.

"Steven Bernacet, he won the singles national that we just had in Wichita about a month ago. Outstanding cornhole pro, but in his senior year, he was a great high school football player, lineman. He was in a horrific car accident and broke his neck. He could have died.

"The doctors immediately told him he wouldn't play contact sports ever again. Obviously to a high school kid who's played sports his whole life, it's devastating to him and his family. Two years later, once he was able to rehab and get back to his new normal of life, he picked up cornhole and has been playing ever since.

"It's been his outlet and his happiness and his source of competitiveness, to fill that desire and that need in his life. Cornhole has been literally life-changing for him.

"One of the top female pros is a manager at a Taco Bell. You know, she plays cornhole on the side.

"Daymon Dennis, who's the number one player in the world right now, worked at a cheese plant for 27 years. He used it to support his family and to keep food on the table. And now here he is, the number one player in the world."

"It's like American Idol," McCarragher says. "There's a lot of people who can sing, but what captured the audience and the ratings for American Idol are all the backstories."

college national championships on New Year's Eve going into 2020. The ratings were slowly going up and up. So this was already on the rise.

"Just by the sheer TV contracts that are coming in and new sponsors, I, for sure, would say that the ACL is still growing."

Kitchin agrees.

"I think the success they had during COVID is going to allow them to continue. Will the viewership be the same? Perhaps not, but I think in this country there's a niche for these types. Like, would you watch baseball, which is hours long? Or you're clicking through and, 'Oh, cornhole, this is something I do in my backyard. My buddies and I bust our chops all the time, let me watch this.' I think that's what's opened it up, those types of things."

JOE HARSH HAS ALREADY experienced cornhole's impact beyond TV.

"For me, it's not even the size of the events and the cool venues we've visited. It's some of the charity work we've done, like for veteran's groups. We did an interview with a guy, [hit by a] roadside bomb in Afghanistan. Long story short, he's a double amputee, and he's thanking me for everything I do, and it just absolutely blows my mind.

"I would do anything for someone like that because they've given so much, and they're thanking us for what we do and the release that we give them. That's my favorite thing to take away from all of this."

Needless to say, McCarragher is eager to keep telling the story.

"I would love that guys would call and have me do a national college football championship. As young broadcasters coming up, we all hope to get that call. But even that being said, I still really would always hope I can continue doing cornhole.

"I will do this for as long as they'll let me, because I love it." ■



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