

DAY IN THE LIFE

# Bag It Up

By Kristen De Deyn Kirk



A LONGTIME ATHLETE AND SPORTS FAN, DEBBIE LOWRANCE KNEW CORNHOLE WOULD BE A WINNER IN HAMPTON ROADS



"See, it's Tony *Cornhole*," says Debbie Lowrance as she shows the name on her cell phone. She's smiling. Seconds ago, early on the third day of the Hampton Sports Festival, she said he'd be calling.

"I give him all the details for the tournaments every time," she says with a laugh, "and he forgets."

Tony's real last name is Longoria. For her cell phonebook, Lowrance renames anyone connected to Beach Cornhole, the business she started two years ago, so that she knows what to expect when she answers. Soon, she might not need to bother with new monikers because her once personal cell phone is morphing into The Cornhole Hotline.

"It's ringing all the time," Lowrance says as she's setting up for the day's competition.

A trip to Wisconsin planted the business idea in her mind. She attended a Milwaukee Brewers game, and it seemed that 50,000 people were playing cornhole beforehand. "Some of them were refusing to go into the Brewers game. They wanted to keep throwing," remembers Lowrance, who also runs a field hockey training business and is a former physical education teacher at Kempsville High School.

Not surprisingly, she promotes the game to students there, and at Cox, Colonial, Bayside, and Old Donation high schools in Virginia Beach. She also sells and rents the boards and bags through Taylor Do-it Centers and is hired by organizations to run games at special events. Old Dominion University tailgating was a prime spot for cornhole last fall. Sixty boards are ready for rental this spring.

On the first night of the Hampton Sports Festival, Lowrance hosted a team building event for Hampton Convention Center employees. "I loved seeing the 62-year-old grandfather with the 25-year-old executive and the 40-something supervisor," she says. "They can all play. There's nothing like cornhole to level the playing field. The nerds can beat the athletes."

The just-for-fun games were followed by serious business. Lowrance, who is one of eight people in America authorized to hold official American Cornhole Organization events, hosted a tournament that could qualify entrants for the Master Series.

At stake that night: \$1,000.

And at stake in the Masters: \$5,000.



## KEEPING SCORE

That's not bad money for throwing a couple of bags onto a wooden board. Or, more precisely, onto the floor underneath a hole in a wooden board. The first earns you one point; the second, three. The first player to reach 21 wins.

Don't go thinking it's easy to rack up 21. Your opponent's earned points are subtracted from your earned points. This means you'll be saying a lot of "yays" (as you score a point), soon followed by a lot "damns" (as your opponent negates your temporary gain).

Most professional cornhole players are men in their 20s and 30s, says Lowrance. Of the top players—called the Corny Forty—just two are women. She calls them all "professionals" legitimately because they earn money throwing those bags 27 feet. Another appropriate term would be "serious," especially when you're talking about the two men who drove nine and a half hours from Cincinnati to compete in Lowrance's Master Series qualifier.

"They figured it would be easier to qualify playing the Virginia boys," says Lowrance.

And for a while it looked like a Midwestern guy just might do that. But Steve Perry from Chesapeake prevailed.

"It was really exciting to see him win. The top players in the world are from the Cincinnati-Kentucky area, where cornhole is a huge game," Lowrance explains.

When professionals play, they aim to hit the cornhole board, made of birchwood and measuring two feet by four, about six inches before the 6-inch hole so that the bag slides in. Beginners who can't judge the distance should hit the top of the American Cornhole logo.

They also strategically aim bags—which are filled with resin, not the original corn feed (hence, the name's game; nothing to do with, um, the *other thing* that might come to mind when you hear the word)—to build a wall on the board that blocks the opponents from sliding in their bag. The two sides of the bag—one sticky and one smooth—make the two types of throws possible.

A third option is "Air Mail."

"That's when you throw the bag up," says Lowrance, "and it goes directly in the hole."

Part of her set up at the Hampton Sports Festival featured a blue "Air Mail" practice box. Watch a professional, and he makes it look as if there's a magnet in their cornhole bag and metal in the small blue box. Time after time, they're drawn together.

Watch a beginner, and it's as if both the bag and the box have magnets in them,

Cornhole players from the Big Woody's Bar and Grill team at the Hampton Sports Festival held at the Hampton Convention Center on Feb. 27.



destined to forever repel each other.

The regular cornhole board is much more user-friendly. Lowrance demonstrates the foot placement (at or slightly behind the opposing board's lower end) and the pitch (under hand and ending at chin height). If you're right-handed, you'll probably prefer to stand to the left of your target. Choose the other side, and you feel awkward as you throw the bag across your body. The bag feels weightless at first, but gets heavier with each throw. They must weigh between 14 and 16.5 ounces. (Don't go trying to sneak in one that doesn't: Weigh-ins are required in tournaments.)

A new player might be able to earn three points on her first slide-in try—or soon after. This player with can-barely-do-a-pushup-arms and bad aim scores big on her fourth attempt, with Lowrance's guidance.

"See?!" says Lowrance as the bag slides in and she gives a high five. "It's euphoric. That's what hooks people."

## THE SOUND OF SUCCESS

The Sports Festival's final-day cornhole schedule is more about fun than money. The prize will be \$160—split between a team of two. Tony Longoria has Cameron, his 9-year-old son, in tow. At home in Frankin is his five-day-old son, Tristan. Cameron is goofing off, throwing a cornhole bag—overhand—with a bunch of kids who have siblings competing in the nearby boxing match.

"Don't throw them at each other," Lowrance says to no avail.

The older players, the "real" players, are more attentive: Tony and many of the 19 others gathered around Lowrance wear jeans, T-shirts and the scent of tobacco. Tiny Lowrance with her blonde bob, preppy blue blazer and scarf stands out as she looks up to make eye contact.

"We'll start with 10 teams and double elimination and then move to single elimination," she explains.

Soon, only two sounds can be heard: The think-think-think of cornhole bags

hitting the boards and the low chatter from the watching girlfriends. Most of the guys—there's only one woman playing—aren't ranked professionally. Keith Lowrance, Debbie's husband and a wrestling coach, is one of the exceptions. On this day, he's the 18th best in the country.

He and Longoria question the weight of a new bag, thinking it's too light, and Keith is surprised when it comes in at just under 16 ounces on the scale.

He uses the bag, throwing it with a spiraling spin, as the better players do. His arm sweeps across his body as he finishes his throw, giving his approach a bit more style than others.

Longoria's arm extends straight forward, but his legs, well, there's something special going on there.

"You have to see Tony's leg kick up," Debbie Lowrance teased earlier.

As he raises his right arm, he bends his left leg up almost as high as his waist and then lunges as he kicks back his right leg.

The fancy foot work moves him along a few rounds, but not to the finals. Three hours into the tournament, that honor goes to Matt Hockaday and Lynn Hoeffler, and Tommy Sweeney and David Wright. The Sweeney-Wright team wins it, but Lowrance, despite carefully tracking the tournament's progress with her chart, hangs the gold medal around Hockaday's neck.

She gets it right when the men correct her, and all is forgiven as she hands over the winners' money that was tucked in her back pocket.

The confusion could have been caused by a long weekend of setting up boards, tracking scores and chatting with players (Lowrance makes instant friends with her smile and her ability to bite her tongue about the constant sneaking-out-back-to-sneak-a-smoke disappearances that make her concerned for the men's health)—or it could be because her heart was elsewhere:

"I was really rooting for Tony," she says.

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