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Childhood game makes contemporary comeback

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A local Chamber of Commerce member and his entrepreneurial partners are cashing in on an age-old game that has found its way into contemporary tailgate culture.

These businessmen — avid tailgate partiers themselves — are marketing a beanbag toss game with a convenient twist. The game also happens to be an ice chest.

The idea for Cool Toss, a game-cooler combo, originated with a pre-game get-together in Tampa Bay, Fla. when a group of long-time friends began pitching undersized Nerf footballs into buckets they'd brought along for icing their drinks.

"Next thing we knew," said Boerne resident Kevin Manner, "we had a crowd watching and one of the (guys) made the comment that we could make our own game and sell it calling it 'bucket ball.'"

Later, as Manner traveled back toward his Boerne home, he was still mentally sifting through the possibilities. And as he leafed through a Skymall magazine he happened to see a cooler with a logo and had a lightbulb-moment with the idea of combining the game and cooler as one.

Since then, according to Manner, Cool Toss, whose ice chest lid is indented with cup-shaped, bean bag "goal" depressions, has garnered exciting levels of attention from both individual and commercial sources.

But Cool Toss' success hasn't exactly been an accident. Although Manner and his friends are themselves the consumers, still they recognized the importance of trying out their game-fridge on other similar groups of potential buyers.

"Once we had 3-D drawings and crude prototypes developed, we decided to test Cool Toss at events around the country to see if it was worth developing," Manner said. "We test marketed Cool Toss in Texas, California, Maryland, Florida, Michigan, Mississippi and Georgia at various events. Event after event we kept getting the same comments about the idea and product, (and people asking) 'Where can I get one?'"

It was a US Navy Fleet Week and Blue Angels Air Show that really pushed the game cooler concept to fruition.

"We had 200- to 300-plus people over the course of the day playing and coming over to us asking where they could get Cool Toss," Manner said.

That happened to be a pivotal experience where he and his soon-to-be partners knew they were "on to something big," he said.

They found a company in San Antonio to do the blow molding, while the chests - or cooler bodies - are purchased from a major manufacturer. Then, the Cool Toss entrepreneurs began publicizing their product.

Not only have they touted the game in a number of mass-attended, outdoor venues, but the Cool Toss partners have had the marketing acumen to gain large amounts of media exposure as well.

Although literature that traces the true history of bean bags is sparse, the dubiously-named toss game of Cornhole may date to earlier than 14th century Germany.

However, that's long-standing history, while today's bean bag toss pastime, held by some enthusiasts to be the hottest new outdoor entertainment on the market, is called by any one of many monikers — Corn Toss, Bean Bag, Bags, Bean Toss, Soft Horseshoes, Indiana Horseshoes, Cornhole — and now Cool Toss.

An eBay search turns up hundreds of palm-sized bean bags supporting an almost unimaginable array of football, baseball, basketball and car racing teams. One can buy Tic-Tac-Toe bean bag games; Happy Clown, Pirate, Backyard Challenge, and Original Tailgate Toss bean bag games; washable Obama and McCain bean bags; handy

little bean bag toting bags; bean bag scorekeeping devices fitted with caddies for holding drinks, keys and cell phones; as well as Eddie Bauer bean bag game kits that include carrying case, eight regulation bean bags, and target boards with "convenient foldable legs."

There are bean bag toss games made by Baggo and Sportcraft and Wild Sales. And a quick look on Amazon pulls up almost 400 bean bag games and related bean bag items. Of course electronics haven't overlooked the bean bag craze — online and Wii bean bag activities are available as well for those who can't muster the energy to heft the regulation, 10.5 ounce real thing.

Bean bag toss games have governing bodies such as the Midwest Bean Bag Association, the National Spring Car Bean Bag Association, the International Bean Bag Association, and the World Bean Bag Association. These organizations oversee countless officially sanctioned playoffs, competitions, tournaments, and even so-called "classics."

While not yet, perhaps, a sports channel prime time draw, bean bag games, particularly among tailgate aficionados, have become something like a "cult," said Manner. And while some folks might dispute this claim as an exaggeration, there is little to dispute regarding Manner's other assertion — no other bean bag games combine the sport with a practical accoutrement. There are no bean bag toss beach umbrellas or bean bag toss barbeque grills or bean bag toss camp chairs. Cool Toss is the only concept of its kind.

Which is why Manner expected consumer response to be good, but still he's surprised and gratified by the success of his game product.

"If you had asked us when we started this Cool Toss adventure, that three months into launching Cool Toss we would be in discussions with one of the largest cooler manufactures in the world about licensing rights and preparing to work with ESPN in the coming weeks, I would have been the first to say they are pretty lofty goals," Manner said. "But the reality is that's where we are today and the legend of Cool Toss is growing daily."

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