

Sports movies have been prevalent in the film industry for a very long time, documenting the Herculean struggle for dominance over... the team that the protagonist isn't on. While these films have recurring plots, such as the rookie (quarterback, pitcher, golfer) trying to earn the respect of (the fans, the team, the country club), or the underdog (boxer, distance runner, literal dog) rising up against all odds to defeat the (egotistical jerk, wealthy misogynist jerk, stereotypical Cold-War-era communist puppet jerk), watching them begs the question: what do all of these films share? It's probably the fact that all of these movies are based on sports that everyone knows.

Anyone reading this magazine has probably either heard of, seen, or played the sport locally designated as cornhole, and most of these people have also experienced the looks of confusion, or in more extreme cases, disgust, when saying the name of the sport in the presence of an unfamiliar. The sport of cornhole is, however, gaining notoriety at a national level through leagues, a videogame called "Bagz," and now, a feature mockumentary, *Cornhole: The Movie*. We sit down with writer/director/producer Tim Clarke, producer Kent Bernhard, and actor/producer Elaine Mello-Clarke to talk about the trials and tribulations of independent filmmaking, the blessings of Tri-State area support, and the nationwide exposure of the Cincinnati Sport.

Cornhole: It's not just for wasted Bengals tailgaters anymore.

Boards of Wood, Bags of fury: ON THE SET OF CORNHOLE: THE MOVIE

BY JAMIE ROCKWELL
PHOTOGRAPHS BY DON MOORE





Shimmers in Fort Wright is an insane blur of activity, with people filing in and out of the ballroom, where filming is set to get underway. While there is a distinct air of professional immediacy to the tasks at hand, the crew members of *Cornhole: The Movie* fire jokes back and forth from time to time; morale is pretty high, considering the twelve-hour-a-day regimen they've been on for weeks.

Tim Clarke, Kent Bernhard, and Elaine Mello-Clarke are no exceptions to the Spartan effort currently underway; filming has to maintain a tight deadline, as the equipment needs to be shipped back to Los Angeles on time, and no later. They greet me and my intrepid managing editor Joe with smiles, maintaining a pleasant intensity belying the near-constant adrenaline rush necessary to keep pace with their schedule. They don't, however, seem to mind taking the time out to talk with us; in fact, they seem more than happy to.

So, it's pretty difficult to perform under pressure in cornhole?

TIM: (laughs) It is.
ELAINE: It is very difficult. We actually went to the National Tournament last December...

It was held here?

ELAINE: Yes, in Kentucky. Frank Geers from the American Cornhole Organization—he's one of the key sponsors of the movie—he was the one who held this tournament, and Tim and I were there, and we witnessed firsthand how competitive the sport was.

It was more cutthroat than you imagined?

TIM: Absolutely.
ELAINE: It is. There's a lot of strategy, and they take it very seriously. [The ACO] set up

tournaments, and people fill their weekends with this sport. We brought in some professionals, because we wanted to show that side of it, and they were glad to be part of it, but said, "I want you guys to know, because we like you, and we believe in this movie, we didn't go to our tournaments this weekend."

"The key thing is, we never have been embarrassed of who we are, and the lack of money didn't stop us."

So they dropped out of their tournaments to hang out with you guys? That's very helpful. One of your consultants...I can't recall the name at the moment, but he's the current champion, and he made, like, forty-four in a row...

TIM: Yeah, Matt Guy.
ELAINE: He's phenomenal.

JOE: How many have you gotten in a row, Jamie?

JAMIE: Uh...I think, like, four. Probably three.

ELAINE: Three's good! Don't knock it.
TIM: (laughs) All boards are different. It's amazing how much that makes a difference. Different tournaments have different boards, and you have to be able to adjust your throw to what's going on.

JR: My friends have boards where the top surface touches the grass, and there were



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: The focus of the film: Kent Bernhard and Tim Clarke; Elaine Mello-Clarke.

OPPOSITE: Tim Clarke.

issues with the bags bouncing from the grass onto the board, and that's definitely illegal...

ELAINE: Tim actually made boards so we could start practicing in L.A., but he shellacked them. That's no good, because the bags slide. And the plywood wasn't thick enough, so you get that bounce. Frank's devised a cornhole board that's really well-made, and he took into account all of the things that can occur.

Did Frank build all of the boards for *Cornhole: The Movie*?

TIM: Yes, his company did.
ELAINE: Then we have the original Cornhole: the tabletop version...Jim Herman is the creator of that one. It's this teeny [makes square with her hands]. With tiny bags. People play at the office, sitting at their desks. We fell in love with it.

When did you guys decide to make a "mockumentary"? Is it in the spirit of a Christopher Guest film?

TIM: Precisely. *Best In Show* meets the Midwest. We're looking at four Cornhole teams fending their way into a national championship.

The teams sound hilarious, by the way...

ELAINE: They're very colorful characters. That's the beauty of it.

You've got Gina, you've got Buddy...

ELAINE: Kassie, his wife... Carmen and Ramon, Jimmy "Bags" Menetti, and Stony Baloney, and his partner. Jimmy's a choker. I took a look at athletes in general, and there's always the ones that don't know how to go that last step. They're really, really good, but don't know what it takes to get that win. Then you've got the ones who know what it takes to win, the clutch hitters. That's Gina, my character. She manipulates to win.

TIM: She's very talented too, but she's there to get everything she can out of the sport. And she wants to parlay her success into an acting career. Like most athletes, they're done by 35, 40 years old. Some make a productive life afterwards; like Lance Armstrong, for example. That's exactly what Gina's trying to do.

Endorsements are a pretty large part of the film.

ELAINE: Yes. Pure Romance is Gina's sponsor. TIM: Another local company. Pure Romance fits her character. It worked. We were very fortunate to run into a lot of companies that wanted to be involved.

ELAINE: A local brewing company is on board, so we named the stadium after them. It's actually this warehouse that we converted into a stadium, and I have to tell you, it looks phenomenal. When we first saw it, we were like, "How are we going to make this work?"

TIM: It was full of wood, old cars...

ELAINE: ..big tractors. We didn't even know if they could move. Everything was covered with dust. Debris galore. And now, it looks magical.

TIM: Like a stadium. It's really exciting, because we have no money for this film.

ELAINE: We said up front, "We're not looking for money. We want to bring you in as a sponsor to show that this is an area film. It's a local sport. In exchange, we want to highlight your product, whatever it may be."

TIM: You add it all up, and you've got five thousand here, ten thousand there, twenty thousand there.

ELAINE: All of our camera equipment was donated by Panavision. Tim's worked on *Close to Home* and *Justice*, so he's developed relationships with the company. He told them he wanted to film in June, which is considered a dead month in L.A., and they liked the mockumentary concept and lent us the cameras.

How did you hear about cornhole in the first place?

TIM: My sister's husband is a huge tailgating fan in Pittsburgh. She had one made that said "Steelers Country" on it for him, he took it to a game, and it ended up in the paper as the best thing since sliced bread. I'm asking myself, "What the heck is cornhole?" I'd never heard of it, and I grew up here! I had this friend who did an air hockey documentary—yeah, there's an Air Hockey National Championship—and I thought, "This cornhole could be cool mockumentary (laughs) a la Christopher Guest." You can do a lot of interview-style stuff where you can get away with not being as polished. It can be very raw, because that's what a mockumentary is supposed to be.

ELAINE: Tim's built a great structure, with the



characters, but he's also—which I love—given the actors a lot of opportunity to improv. TIM: They can't really do anything wrong in front of the camera. They know the character, they work the character, we make adjustments, and just go with it. It's exciting for them to create an attitude and take it to a whole new level. We saw it when we were auditioning. The people that we cast came in, having made specific decisions about that character. They ran a risk. They said, "This is the way we're going to take it, and if it's wrong, we'll be wrong. We'll be wrong big, but if we're right, we're going to be right big"

ELAINE: One man came in—a banker—and he was sweating. He could barely deliver the lines, and we said, "What's your job at the bank? Are you in a leader-type position?" He said, "Yes," and I said, "Try your work mode." And believe it or not, he got that concept and started delivering. So many people came into this audition and said, "Thank you so much for helping me live out a dream. We've always wanted to go in for an audition for a Hollywood film." The joke of it is, we're so far from Hollywood. We're from Los Angeles, but this picture is...well, it's anti-Hollywood. We're breaking every rule. That's why we said during casting to Jacquie, "Whoever wants to come in, let's give it a shot." We had around 1,500 submissions overall and 175 people actually came in to audition.

Did you find, when you cast for your final parts, that you got a mix of those?

TIM: You can only expect a certain level of professionalism when you're casting somebody who isn't trained. When you point a camera at someone, they [makes a face like a smiling deer in the headlights] "Smile!" That wall goes up, right behind the eyes. You have to train someone to lose that.

ELAINE: We had some non-actors in roles. And we do have real cornhole players, who also aren't actors. They play the game, they get into it, and we're saying, "Pretend we're not here." They're starting to understand that. "Well, how did I do? I kissed the bag before I threw it." And I'm like, "Perfect!"

They get to fill out your cast.

ELAINE: Absolutely. This past weekend, we had extras that were so into it. I mean, we were here all day long and not one of them complained once. The energy was amazing. Tim's on the bullhorn, we're doing raffles... just different things to keep them involved.

A movie set atmosphere is so new to a lot of people.

ELAINE: A few people were on their cell phones after lunch, saying, "Oh, I have to get back on set." I could tell they were loving it.

TIM: We're very fortunate. I've been on sets where the energy is bad. We've chosen people, crew, actors—this was an opportunity. It had to be seen that way, not as an obligation, because when it gets hot, or gets to be a long day, or gets tense, they're the first ones to leave. If it's just for money, they won't do it.

ELAINE: Movie making is hard work.

TIM: It is. It's hard work. We're working twelve-hour days.

ELAINE: It's gotten to the point where—and this is all of us—every night we're getting four hours of sleep, then back at it. >>>



We have to be hyper-focused. There are so many different elements we're dealing with. We've been very, very fortunate to have an incredible crew. We couldn't do without the local talent. We actually held auditions in L.A. because we were afraid that we wouldn't be able to find the talent around here, and these actors actually superseded a lot of the L.A. talent. We only had a few actors that we brought in from L.A.; the majority of them came from here. We have 11 main actors, and 25 players.

TIM: And we got a lot of the kids from Brown Mackie College, and the Art Institute. This is a learning experience. I think Elaine is probably the only one of us that's done her job before, as producer and actress. [Kent] has never produced a feature film, I've never directed a feature film. We've got one of the top digital imaging technicians in Los Angeles, who came out, and he's able make these cameras really do their best. So it's been a little bit of everybody. We've even got the top sound guy out of Cincinnati.

KENT: Even the interns coming into this for the first time are rising to the occasion.

ELAINE: With anything, there's going to be a learning curve, and we're having to take that into account. But everyone's putting all their energy into it. You can't ask for

How did you guys make your connections?

TIM: I grew up in West Chester, and went to St. Susanna's, and then St. X, and then Ohio State. So, I'm a local. But in making connections, everybody's jumping up in position to do it, and as we've stated, it wouldn't be fair to get people involved in something that wasn't true. We tell them, "This is who we are. This is what we have to offer you." If they ever had an inkling or a thought that they might want to go out to Los Angeles—and the business that we know is a "who you know" business

"Some days you leave, and you're like, 'Yeah! This is why we're doing it!'"

—they can break in, but it's so much easier when you can pick up the phone and say, "You know what, Tim? I worked three weeks for you. Could you help me out?" And if I could I'd make sure they got a start somewhere.

KENT: Incidentally, we've got a couple people on board who work locally, and we have people who've never done this before, and they saw the opportunity. They weren't even thinking about Los Angeles, and now they're going to be working all the time now that they've done this movie. It really provided a springboard.

Obviously, you're looking at this project being very beneficial to those involved.

As far as sports comedies go, there are movies about real sports, like *Caddyshack*, and then there are movies about obscure sports, or even sports that don't exist, like *Basketball*, or *Beerfest*. What do you think this movie will do for cornhole?

ELAINE: That's our goal. Frank Geers from the American Cornhole Organization wants to take cornhole to the next level. We actually found out that in Beverly Hills, they're having a cornhole tournament, which is nice, because, on another project I helped produce, I had to go to a distribution meeting—several, actually—and pitch *Cornhole: The Movie*. It intrigued them. Through that, hopefully, is a catalyst that draws people into the film, and will make them want to learn about this sport. When Tim built the boards on our front lawn, everybody that walked by was curious. It's a game that everybody can play.

KENT: A day to learn, a lifetime to master!

ELAINE: Matt Guy's theory, why he says he's the champion, is because he doesn't drink. He said, "Most of the people that play cornhole are sloshed, and I just refrain from that."

TIM: Otherwise you start taking those high-risk shots.

KENT: It's a good stress reliever, cornhole. We set up a few meetings just to figure out some of the mechanics.

TIM: We're living the dream.

ELAINE: (laughs) That's it. But we're making something we wanted to create. It's one of those things, so many people want to do it, but very few take initiative. We don't know where our movie's going to land.

TIM: And once we're done shooting, it's not over. There's a whole other leg to it. Hopefully

this will launch us into future endeavors. We're building our core foundations. We've done some short films together, and we have a nice blend of energy and personality, which is another factor: bringing together fifty people who are completely different and expecting everybody to get along for sixteen hours every day.

ELAINE: Mine and Kent's job is to block whatever surfaces from [Tim], so he can focus on creativity. We're trying to sift through all of this stuff so it doesn't get back to him. And we deal with all of the grunt, and, unfortunately, when I'm acting, it's all on [Kent's] shoulders. He deals with all the grunt. It's a lot of stuff.

Especially since you're filling a dual role.

ELAINE: It is. I realized once the weekend came, these scenes were coming up, and I said to Kent, "I can't do both." I have to turn off the producer's mind, and focus on the creative mind. People are used to asking me questions, and I can't field that question. "Go to Kent." And they very respectfully did so.

You said you've worked together on other short films?

KENT: We did a short project together last year, and I've known them for a couple of years before that, and at a script reading that [Tim] did, was the first time I saw [Elaine] act. One of the things that I think we do really well is we set a deadline and work hard to make sure we hit it. If we say, "We're going to start shooting on the 29th," then we start shooting on the 29th.

TIM: The equipment was the thing. Then we

started talking about the stars, and things like that. We'd get replies like, "It's possible, but he's not available at such and such time." I ultimately had to step in and say "This is where we're going, this is what we're doing, and if you can be a part of it, great. If not, that's cool, too." There's nothing wrong with the people that didn't want to do it, or couldn't for whatever reason. That's okay. The key thing is we've never been embarrassed of who we are. The lack of money didn't stop us.

KENT: And we really appreciate those who stepped up.

ELAINE: We didn't persuade anybody to be involved. It was a mutual kind of thing. The seed was planted in some of their heads, and by the time we came to them, saying, "Hey, I'm doing *Cornhole: The Movie*," they perked up. I heard "yes" coming from them right away, and now it's just a question of getting it to work on both ends.

What about distribution, though?

KENT: Distribution's different, but the principle stays the same: you've got to find people who see a similar opportunity, and make the effort. We have a very limited budget, but we presented it like it was a big opportunity, because we do see it as a big opportunity. Everybody, from all the businesses that got involved, and all the donations we were given, all the cast, crew, the extras, the interns, everybody has been performing above their level. If you break it down, we're all amateurs at this particular profession, but this feels like a professional film set, and we take it very seriously.

As far as process goes, do you rely on your personal experiences in independent filmmaking, or do you take cues from other independent filmmakers, as far as how to do this on a limited budget?

KENT: I have a few friends who did low-budget films, and I've made lots of phone calls. Some stuff you just don't know, it kind of comes up, and you just figure it out as you go along.

ELAINE: Every project is different. Certain elements surface you can't necessarily anticipate. I had the opportunity to work with the Spirit awards in Los Angeles, and was able to meet a lot of directors and producers who were working on what they call "low budget." They're talking and quoting budgets of three million dollars. I'm thinking of our twenty thousand and laughing. The barometer's a little off here. When you hear their philosophy on how they're budgeting their films, you really have to handle it the same way. You're always trying to find tactful ways to get the maximum use out of your creativity, with the least amount of money.

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OPPOSITE: On the set at Shimmer.

THIS PAGE: Tim Clarke directs Eric Feliciano and Marizilda Garcia in a top-accurate scene.



extm wrap party

As our interview ends, our interviewees head their separate ways on the set; it's time to go to work. The intensity of the atmosphere is marked by a sudden silence, and Tim begins to go over the specifics of the scene with the cast and crew. Positions are taken, and the film rolls.

The scene taking place is, expectedly, a cornhole tournament. While there is no dialogue in the scene, there is a great amount of activity, spurning mostly from the extras, who concentrate on throwing. As Tim issues commands to the crew, nothing goes unheeded; it's obvious that they've been working together for some time as a cohesive unit, and their sheer professionalism is striking. The suggestion is given that the extras aren't being energetic enough, and upon mention of this, the decibel level in the room increases twofold. As the extras play the game excitedly while *pretending* to play the game excitedly, actor Eric Feliciano is charged with the task of throwing a toss and making it. He squares up with the board, and begins throwing, his first two tosses striking on-screen wife and cornhole partner Marisilda Garcia in the left foot. She isn't fazed by the contact, or even when one of the extras accidentally lobs a bag into the lighting equipment across the room from her; she stays on target, never taking her eyes off Feliciano. After a few more tries, he holes-in, and Garcia meets him halfway to exchange a congratulatory kiss. "Cut!"

Two weeks after the interview, we're invited to the wrap party at the Lodge in downtown Cincinnati. A red carpet extends into the doorway revealing a packed house; the faint lighting generated by a news camera flickers around the room as the cast, crew, friends, and family mingle.

"It's sad to see filming end," says actor Ron Burrage. "But it's also very exciting. Of course, now, we wait until the movie's actually finished. I don't know what I'm going to do with all of my time now—but don't tell P&G that," he jokes, referring to his day job as an art director for Procter & Gamble. After praising the collective efforts and long hours of everyone in the room and apologizing in advance for his language, Kent Bernhard finishes his closing speech on stage with, "I have to say it... *We just made a f***ing MOVIE!*" The speech ends with a deafening cheer, and the party rolls on.

Though the future of the film remains unclear as of this writing; distribution and accolades notwithstanding, this assuredly won't be an experience anyone involved with *Cornhole: The Movie* will soon forget.



FROM LEFT: Doug Teeger, Emily Halberd, Igan Price, Dan Selig, and Dolenz Selig.



Tammy Kerr, Laura Dorger, Leslie Chapman, and Marisa Blair.



Yveson Dow and Randy Jeter.



Sylvie Sum and Casting Director Jacque Loughery.



FROM LEFT: Tim Clarke, Elaine Mello-Clarke, and Kent Bernhard give their closing speeches.



Marisilda Garcia and Peter Condopoulos.



Eric Feliciano and Tim Illinger.



Terry Lupp and Eric Feliciano.



TM's Jamie Rockwell and Ron Burrage.



Tim Clarke and Elaine Mello-Clarke.