Love, Brian J and Michael L. Burns. *Corked: Tales of Advantage in Competitive Sports*.(Fifth Avenue, 2019).

Reviewed by Dave Buchanan, MacEwan University

*Corked* consists of 26 ten-page chapters of about 10 pages, each profiling a story of what the authors, Brian J. Love and Michael L. Burns, call “advantage” in competitive sports--bending or breaking the rules in order to get an edge. The diversity of sports the book considers is impressive, running from the mainstream (baseball, basketball, hockey, football) to what many North American sports fans would probably consider the marginal (jai alai, cricket, sailing, curling). In the preface, the authors say the intent of the book is to entertain and provoke thought. And for a certain kind of sports nerd, many of the stories here will do just that.

The timing of this book is fortuitous. The recent sign-stealing scandal in Major League Baseball has brought unprecedented attention to the question of what’s technically and ethically allowable when it comes to gaining an advantage in a sports competition. Before the pandemic came along, the cloud of controversy swirling around the Houston Astros seemed poised to be a major story of the 2020 MLB season.

The book’s authors are academics with a passion for sports and an interest in number crunching and sports trivia. Most of the claims about advantage are supported by analytics of some kind. But the research is mostly on the light side, with a couple of exceptions (if you’re into formulas for determining the mass advantage of a corked bat, you’ll get your fix in the title chapter). For the most part, though, the authors keep the tone accessible and the data between the lines of the charts.

The stories of advantage here generally fall into three categories: certain playing surfaces or the manipulation thereof (baseball, tennis, hockey); equipment--as in doctoring the equipment of the sport (air pressure of a football, the surface of a baseball, or construction of a bat) or coming up with a technological innovation that the rules of a sport have not anticipated (skinsuits in swimming, hi-tech curling brushes); and home field advantage.

My favorite chapters, by far, involved the first two categories, especially the ones involving baseball. This may be due, in part, to my personal fondness for that sport but it’s also true, I think, that baseball has one of the richest traditions when it comes to ingenious ways to eke out any kind of advantage at all (think of those garbage can signals from the Astros dugout). I loved the story of how the groundskeepers at Candlestick Park helped the Giants neutralize base-stealing whiz Maury Wills during the 1962 season; or the tales of pitchers doctoring baseballs with foreign objects or substances; even the chapter about how certain ballparks still find ways to manipulate the Batter’s Eye, the blacked out area in centrefield behind the pitcher.

As much as I enjoyed some parts of this book, I found that others didn’t quite fit under the larger heading of “advantage.” The chapter on jai alai, for instance, seems more interested in explaining the fascinating origins, rules, and evolution of this fringe sport. This penchant for interesting trivia sometimes overshadows the “advantage” focus of the book. While the tradition of tossing octopi onto the ice during Detroit Red Wings games makes for a wonderfully bizarre story, I don’t know that it has much to do with “advantage.”

Some other chapters feel kind of obvious. The cycling one, for instance, focusing on its well documented doping problems and the one about employing the shift in baseball fielding are kind of old news for most sports fans. And the home-field ones, in particular, I found less interesting. Every fan knows about this particular “advantage.” It’s kind of common sense and not really something that teams or players can control.

But if the authors wanted to do a follow up book, I’d suggest one on just baseball. When I was a kid playing wiffle ball in my driveway, we’d not only pretend we were our heroes, Nolan Ryan and Reggie Jackson; we’d also pretend to cheat--stashing a dab of Vaseline under our cap brims a la Gaylord Perry--or even react to a faux accusation of cheating (pantomiming George Brett’s pine-tar freak out) because we thought it was funny and, on some level, we knew that it was an actual, storied, if unsanctioned, part of the game. I’m not sure you could say the same of any other mainstream sport.

So, Corked 2: The Garbage Can Chronicles? The timing is right for it.