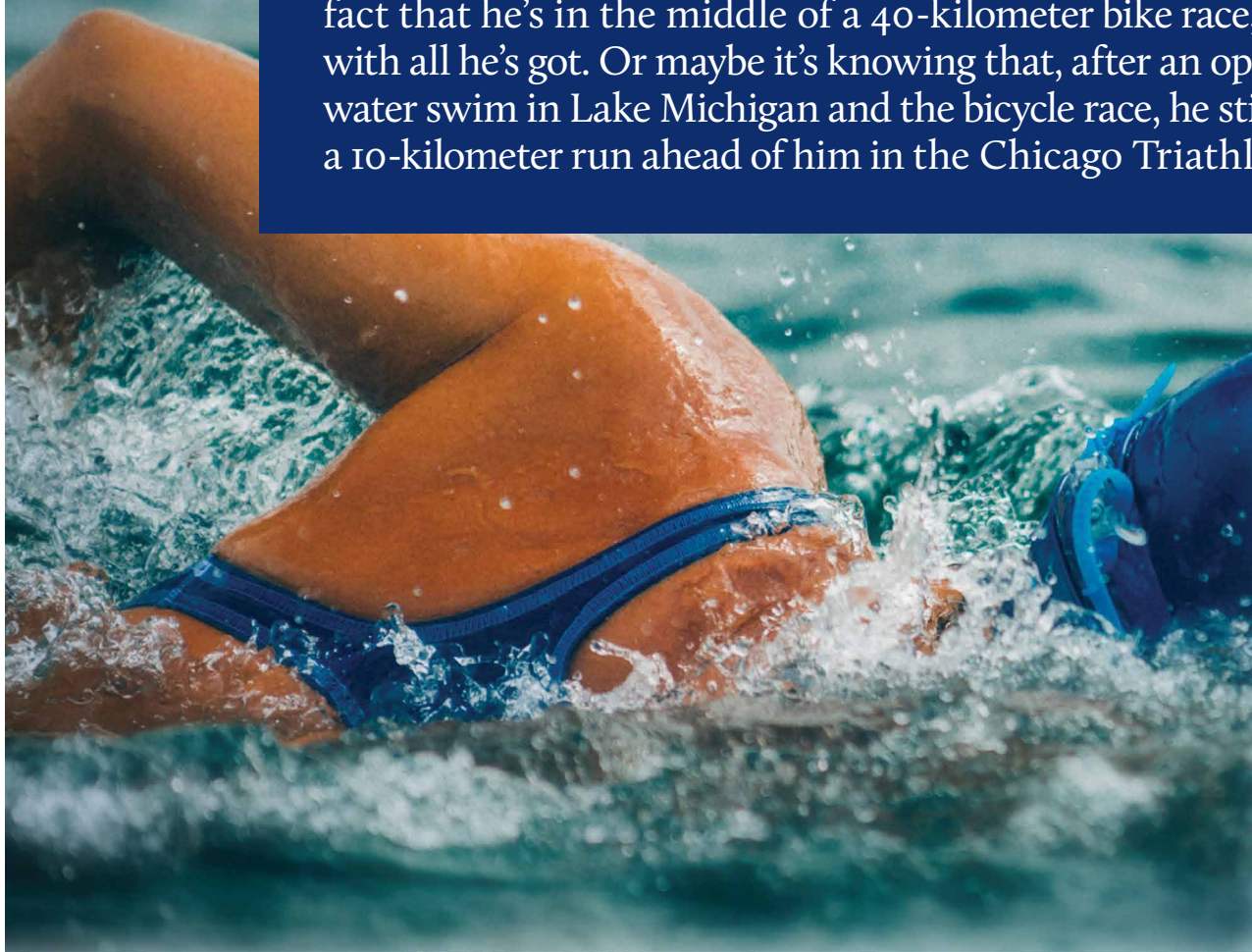


# CEOs Who Go the Distance—Literally.

BY PATRICIA CRISAFULLI

**A**lain Villeneuve is feeling queasy. It's Sunday, very warm under a sunny, cloudless sky along Chicago's lakefront. But it's not the weather that's bothering him. Perhaps it's the fact that he's in the middle of a 40-kilometer bike race, pedaling with all he's got. Or maybe it's knowing that, after an open-water swim in Lake Michigan and the bicycle race, he still has a 10-kilometer run ahead of him in the Chicago Triathlon.





**“There’s no faking it.  
You put in what you get out.”**

As he pushes himself forward, Villeneuve is indistinguishable from the other competitors. Nobody can tell amid the sweat and brightly colored unitard that he’s a senior executive, an equity partner of Vedder Price specializing in intellectual property law.

Being a CEO is one of the world’s most stressful jobs, and other C-level positions aren’t far behind. So when it comes to



downtime, one might expect them to seek seclusion on an exotic beach. For endurance executives like Villeneuve, however, relaxation is found in pushing the limits in triathlons and other endurance events.

That’s where CEO Challenges comes in, pitting top executives against each other in about a half-dozen endurance races held from Havana to Colorado each year. The events are open to top leaders of companies with a minimum of \$10 million in annual revenue, with about 1,850 CEOs and other C-level leaders now participating.

“There’s no faking it,” said Philip Newbold, CEO of Beacon Health System, based in South Bend, Ind., who boasts 19 finishes in Ironman triathlons—2.4 miles of swimming, 112 miles of biking and running a full marathon.

The 68-year-old, who was an Olympic torchbearer for the 2002 Winter Olympics, is in his 29th season of endurance sports. “What you put in is what you get out. I like that part of it.”

Among the most grueling of CEO Challenges: a 100-mile mountain bike race in Leadville, Colo., that starts at 10,000 feet and goes up from there, topping out at 12,500 feet. Last year, some 20 CEOs, representing \$18 billion in combined annual revenue, joined the field. “Very extreme and by far the most popular among the CEOs,” said Ted Kennedy, founder of CEO Challenges, which is owned by Life Time Fitness.

Not surprisingly, most of the CEOs are not in the league of world-class competitors. But at the recent Chicago Triathlon, Greg Werner, general manager of Mortenson Company’s





Chicago office, ranked 53 out of 2,762 finishers, and fifth out of 172 in the 45–49 age group; Diana McKenzie, CIO of Workday, was the 44th female out of 890 overall, and second out of 38 women in the 50–54 age group.

The competitive spirit, among other motives, drives most of the competitors. But while endurance and extreme sports are associated with fearlessness, a study in the *Journal of Health Psychology* found that facing fears actually helps athletes manage fears in other aspects of life—for CEOs that may apply to better risk management and to humility. “As a leader, you need humbling,” said Villeneuve in an interview at his Chicago office where he displays the gold medal he won in the 2009 World Outgames in Copenhagen.

“There is always another finish line to cross,” added Margo Selby, director of marketing for Astor Investment Management, an asset allocation and investment firm, who has finished four triathlons and 12 marathons.

As for Villeneuve, he has his sights on the Chicago Marathon. Next time, though, he won’t repeat the mistake that led to his queasiness. “I realized that I forgot to wash out my water bottle,” he said. “I think I had some two-month-old Gatorade in there. Not good.” ●

## Are You Up to the Challenge?

### The Fittest

Three days of competition—limited to 10 CEOs—who compete alongside professional triathletes as part of the Island House Triathlon in the Bahamas, seeking to earn the title “The Fittest CEO.”

### The Most Extreme

The Leadville, Colo., 100-mile mountain bike race at high altitudes. The 2016 CEO Challenge winner

was Hans-Petter Mellerud, CEO of Zalaris ASA of Norway.

### The Longest Distance

Race Across America, a 3,100-mile team bicycle race, from Oceanside, Calif., to Annapolis, Md.

### The Newest Route

The Marabana Cuba Marathon opens a new cultural and running experience after Cuba’s normalized relations with the United States.



Watch our video interview of a CEO competitor.  
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