

A Personal Challenge

An Interview with
Andrew Messick, Chief Executive Officer, IRONMAN



Mirinda Carfrae finishing an IRONMAN triathlon

EDITORS' NOTE Prior to joining IRONMAN in 2011, Andrew Messick served as President of AEG Sports since 2007. At AEG, he played a leading role in its international development, and for its sports teams and properties. From 2000 through 2007, he was the Senior Vice President of NBA International. Messick joined the NBA from Sara Lee Corporation, where he held a range of business development, marketing, and general management positions in the U.K., Australia, and Canada. He earned a B.A. in Economics and Psychology from the University of California, Davis and an M.B.A. from the Yale School of Management.



Andrew Messick

COMPANY BRIEF A Wanda Sports Holdings company, IRONMAN (ironman.com) operates a global portfolio of events that includes the IRONMAN® Triathlon Series, the IRONMAN® 70.3® Triathlon Series, the 5150™ Triathlon Series, Iron Girl®, IRONKIDS®, six of nine International Triathlon Union World Triathlon Series races, road cycling events including the UCI Velotthon Majors Series, mountain bike races, premier marathons, and other multisport races. IRONMAN's events, together with all other Wanda Sports Holdings events, provide more than 680,000 participants annually the benefits of endurance sports through the company's vast offerings. The iconic IRONMAN® Series of events is the largest participation sports platform in the world. Since the inception of the IRONMAN® brand in 1978, athletes have proven that ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE® by crossing finish lines at the world's most challenging endurance races. Beginning as a single race, IRONMAN has grown to become a global sensation.

Would you talk about the vision for the formation of IRONMAN?

The vision and culture of IRONMAN has remained consistent over the nearly 40 years we have been around.

It wasn't a race originally – it was a personal challenge. From the beginning, it wasn't intended to be a race but a one-day event where anyone who finishes will be called an IRONMAN. It was about finding a way to complete the miles to get to the finish line.

This is still the overwhelming cultural aspect of IRONMAN. It's not about winning or qualifying, but about finishing.

The crowds for our races are biggest at the end, and we celebrate the people who find a way to finish.

It's not just the hare but the tortoise that is celebrated. With any great undertaking, it's the effort over time, and finding reasons not to give up, that carries the day and binds the athletes closely to us.

Is this a niche for the more serious athlete or is it a broader market?

Anyone can do it. Part of the appeal is that there are 17 hours to cover 140.6 miles and if one is prepared, they can get there. Our races remind people they can overcome and the act of overcoming makes people feel very alive. Last year, more than 85,000 athletes registered to race an IRONMAN with 35,000 of those being first-timers. More and more, people are finding that they have the ability to accomplish great things with preparation and fortitude.

Is there a lot of innovation around the races?

We've had to be innovative, largely as a reflection of the increased popularity of our events. We always look at how we create great life-changing events. For instance, we've changed the way we put athletes into the water because a mass swim start for 3,000 athletes is harrowing.

How important is the globalization of the brand?

There has been a substantial emphasis on that. We have opened races in Latin America and the Middle East, in Asia, and Eastern Europe.

There are IRONMAN athletes in all of those places. While our athletes are a global group and remarkable in their willingness to travel to events, there are strong pockets of local athletes. We have found there is nothing more powerful than putting a race into a country to help galvanize the endurance and participation sports culture of that country. We also want athletes to know that there will be a consistent experience and standard of excellence at any race of ours they take part in.

What about the business of IRONMAN?

I learned a lot working for (former NBA Commissioner) David Stern, and I think about the NBA quite a bit when it comes to building our global brand.

We think about races the way retailers think about stores, and the way leagues think about teams. We're thoughtful about where we place them geographically and on the calendar, and consider the impact of one race on another.

What impact has the ownership change had and has the transition been smooth?

Wanda is a global-minded organization that shares our desire for excellence and continued growth, particularly in Asia. The folks from Wanda were very clear with us that their expectations were that our team was going to continue to manage and build our company and the brand everywhere except China, because they could really help us in China.

As we think about how to create mass participation in the endurance sports culture in China, having Wanda as a partner is enormously valuable. They can help open doors and opportunities for us to continue to reinforce our position as the best, biggest, and most capable race company in the world.

Are there brand extensions for IRONMAN?

There are a number of brand extensions and it's an area we're pioneering in China.

We are the largest owner/operator of long-distance triathlons in the world. Because of this, we are also the largest organizer of mass-produced sporting events in the world. There is a lot of overlap in terms of the operations of a triathlon and operating a running race, or a cycling event, or an open water swimming event. We have the ability to extend our core capabilities along an axis of race organization.

We also think that there isn't an organization in the world that knows more about how to prepare athletes for competition, especially in endurance events. We have an initiative called IRONMAN U that we piloted last year. It's a coaching certification program for triathlon. We're currently extending that into China as not just a coaching certification but as a direct-to-athlete training platform to help them prepare for events. Until this point, there hasn't been a trusted source to do that. ●