



Will Dean

EDITORS' NOTE Will Dean has held his current post since July 2009. Prior to this, he was Second Secretary to the British High Commission in New Delhi, India, and before that, he was a Counterterrorism Desk Officer in the Foreign & Commonwealth Office in the U.K. He received his M.B.A. from Harvard Business School and his BSC from the University of Bristol.

COMPANY BRIEF Tough Mudder, Inc. (toughmudder.com) is an obstacle course event series in which participants attempt obstacles that test mental as well as physical strength. Since its launch in 2010, Tough Mudder has become a leading global sports, active lifestyle and media brand. With more than three million participants, the company hosts more than 130 non-competitive and competitive events annually in 11 countries.

Will you discuss your vision in creating Tough Mudder?

I believed there was a big space in the market for an event that was all about personal achievement, but wasn't a race. The idea was to create something that was about bringing people together. It seemed there wasn't an event out there that let people be part of a team after college.

The mission statement for the company is to grow Mudder Nation into a global tribe that lives the values of teamwork, courage, personal accomplishment and fun. Those are my values as well.

Some parts of the event are just about physical challenges, much of it is about overcoming mental barriers and a lot of it requires help from other people.

We're three businesses under one brand: we're the events business, of which there are seven different events; we also have the international expansion and media sponsorships and partnerships; then we have the training business.

Early on, in such a crowded space, was it challenging to differentiate?

Absolutely. A few years ago, there were many of these types of companies, many of which have since disappeared.

In the past year, we've come to understand that we're more about team, community and

Teamwork, Courage, Personal Accomplishment and Fun

An Interview with Will Dean,
Chief Executive and Co-Founder, Tough Mudder, Inc.

mental courage as opposed to the physical grit of some of the others.

How do you define the Tough Mudder participant?

Twenty-five percent of people at our events today are men in their 20s and 30s in great physical shape. Probably 60 percent of the people are in moderate shape. There is also a small portion of people for whom Tough Mudder is a life-changing experience.

Our addressable market is bigger than the traditional Road Running market. One must be in reasonable shape, but the obstacles are all about doing things together. The camaraderie aspect of it is terrific.

This past year, we added the Tough Mudder Half, which will draw more than 100,000 people, over 50 percent women. We're starting to see a nice uptick from the Half to the Full event as well.

On the events side, are there additional opportunities to increase your offering?

We have a relatively logical suite of events now: the 5K, the Half, the Full, the Tougher and the Toughest.

We just launched a new event with CBS called *Tough Mudder X*, which is very high intensity. That is currently a TV concept, but we're considering that for mass participation.

You're also doing special events for kids?

Every event has a Mini Mudder. Once we've built the infrastructure, it's easy to add other events into it. A Tough Mudder event weekend in cities across the country will have a Half, a Full and a Tougher. Some of them will have an overnight Toughest competitive race event.

For the training business, is it for people who want to do a Tough Mudder or is it for those who just want to get in better shape?

There are three groups: people who are doing Tough Mudders and want to do more of them; people that aspire to do a Tough Mudder and aren't sure; and those who want a group-based, functional fitness experience that isn't just aerobic, but for whom CrossFit sounds too scary.

The hope is that most people who come to the gym participate in events as well, but it's not mandatory.

We are excited about expanding into the fitness studio space, with Tough Mudder Bootcamp, which centers around team training and community. We have over 65 territories already reserved in the U.S.

Will you talk about your international expansion and the additional markets you're focusing on for growth?

We're about to announce our partnership in South Africa – that will be a new market for us in 2018. We're currently in 11 countries – the U.S., Canada, Mexico, the U.K., Germany, Ireland, Dubai, China, Indonesia, Australia and New Zealand.

In terms of expansion opportunities, Western and Eastern Europe are target regions, as well as Latin America and Asia.

As the company has grown, how have you approached hiring new talent?

We try to be very open with people and explain that Tough Mudder is not for everyone. According to our employee surveys, 90 percent of our employees are happy here; 10 percent are unhappy.

I'm honest with people and let them know they should work elsewhere if they are unhappy. It's a great place for some people, but not for everyone.

Often in startup companies, people think it's about having a foosball table and beer in the fridge, but that is irrelevant. It's about how people behave when their boss isn't looking. Culture just defines behavioral norms. We produce events in the middle of fields where, by definition, the boss isn't looking. We generally rely on quite young people to run these events, because live events that happen on weekends with a lot of travel is a young person's game. We're putting a lot of responsibility on them.

We need to know we have people who will do things the right way regardless of whether there is a system or process in place. Therefore, we look for resolve and initiative, and evidence that people have overcome setbacks in life.

Because we're a medium-size business, we're somewhere in the middle in terms of systems and processes, and that can make us a challenging place at which to work for those coming from a startup or a large organization.

Regarding your book, *It Takes A Tribe: Building The Tough Mudder Movement*, which was just published, what made you want to write the book?

We're starting to produce events in non-English speaking countries, so we're trying to capture the ethos of what the company is about and the journey through which we have arrived at where we are today. I can now give my book to a potential partner, so they know our story.

On a personal front, it has been an amazing and intense seven-year adventure. I've had wonderful experiences, some more fun than others, and I wanted to capture them on paper before those memories become hazy. ●