

# A TOUGH ACT TO FOLLOW

Endurance event firm Tough Mudder has grown from a start-up to a £75m-turnover concern in seven years; attracting more than three million participants globally. Given that 20,000 of them have tattoos of the company logo, its co-founder and CEO, Will Dean, knows a thing or two about branding that sticks. He tells *Director* how his business hit pay dirt

Words Nick Scott Photographs Mark Harrison

Some brands foster loyalty using store cards and tier points. The Apples, Nikes and Harley-Davidsons encourage their superfans to evangelise online. Tough Mudder, meanwhile, embeds the company logo under the skin of its most ardent apostles in bold black and orange pigments. “We’ve just had our 20,000th person tattooed,” says the firm’s co-founder and CEO, Will Dean, proudly.

For those who came in late, Tough Mudder holds weekend endurance events around the world, featuring obstacles whose names – Arctic Enema, Electric Eel, Trench Warfare, Fire Walker – give some clue as to the level of fortitude required. Buckets of ice, underwater tunnels and 10,000V wires all made it out of the firm’s “innovation lab”. Tarantulas, acid bubbles and tear gas – all suggested at least partially in jest – didn’t make the cut.

Tough Mudder’s extraordinary story begins in 2010, when Dean held his first adult obstacle course event in Pennsylvania, having formed a partnership with an old friend, ex-lawyer Guy Livingstone. Hoping – no, praying – for 450 entrants, they attracted 5,000 people. Three events in year one grew to 14 the next and 35 the year after. Now there are 130 annual

Tough Mudder challenges in 11 countries. The company has grown to 150 employees (120 at its New York HQ and 30 in London) and it turns over more than £75m a year.

To understand the corporate ethos, one has to rewind to Dean’s formative years in Worksop, Nottinghamshire – a town whose economy “collapsed along with any sense of shared purpose” after the local coal mines closed in the 1980s, as he puts it in his new book, *It Takes A Tribe*. He felt little but alienation living there and was also a fish out of water at the “very privileged” public school he attended. As he tells *Director*, Tough Mudder emanated from “a desire to create something where I fitted in – an organisation that shared my values, because I’d created it”.

After graduating from the University of Bristol with a degree in economics and politics, Dean worked for five years in the Foreign & Commonwealth Office’s anti-terrorism division. This experience proved invaluable to his personal development.

“The training they give you is first class; the people there are very bright, but with small egos; and there’s a true sense of camaraderie. All this gives you a very clear mission and purpose,” he says.

By contrast, Harvard Business School, where Dean later took a

## CV

**1980** Dean is born in Sheffield, but spends most of his childhood in Worksop, Nottinghamshire

**1999** Embarks on a BSc in economics and politics at Bristol, having spent much of a gap year travelling alone in Pakistan

**2002** Starts a five-year stint at the Foreign & Commonwealth Office’s counter-terrorism division

**2007** Conceives the idea for Tough Mudder as a second-year MBA candidate at Harvard Business School

**2010** Holds the first Tough Mudder event at the Bear Creek Mountain Resort in Pennsylvania

**2017** Receives an MBE for outstanding service to the community. The same year, Tough Mudder will host more than 130 events across 11 countries on four continents, with total participants exceeding the three million mark

two-year MBA course, felt like another unnatural environment. “It was so focused on money, individual accomplishment and showing off,” he recalls.

Dean’s time at Harvard did sharpen his commercial acumen, albeit in a way that one might not predict. “It felt very much like a finance finishing school, rather than an environment that was genuinely conducive to taking risks and doing new things,” he says. “The truth is that doing business isn’t rocket science, but the experience did give me a remarkable sense of confidence. I realised that I could keep up with people who were the future CEOs of these large US companies.”

The academics were lukewarm about Dean’s paper outlining his embryonic plans for Tough Mudder. He was, of course, undeterred. “There are lots of complicated things about putting on these events, but they won’t ever teach a ‘Mud run 101’ course at Harvard,” he laughs.

## Staying the course

*It Takes A Tribe* opens with a quote from Napoléon Bonaparte: “One jumps into the fray, then figures out what to do next.”

It’s a dictum that proves more and more apposite as Dean’s story progresses. The book tells of the







logistical booby traps of the type that lurk at the early stages of many an entrepreneurial journey. Mix-ups with transport bookings, insurance problems, gear-wrecking floods and Baptist zealots objecting to beer-and-mud fests on the Sabbath all had to be dealt with. Dean, who started the firm in New York partly because of its “phenomenal access to talent, sports media and entertainment businesses”, also recalls driving around in an old VW Jetta, searching desperately for somewhere to host the first event.

Once the venture was under way, a rivalry between Tough Mudder and a similar, but vehemently more competitive, event called Spartan Race was born. This peaked in 2012 when the latter’s creator, former Wall Street trader Joe De Sena, publicly stated: “There’s not a person on this planet I despise more than Will Dean.”

This Coke v Pepsi scenario, which continues to simmer, only galvanised Dean, Livingstone and their team – as did a lawsuit from Billy Wilson, aka Mr Mouse, an eccentric Englishman who had created the Tough Guy obstacle event on a boggy piece of farmland near

Wolverhampton. In simple terms, this accused Dean of purloining his idea.

“Being sued, especially when you’re a start-up and you have no assets, is incredibly stressful,” Dean says. “You worry about bankruptcy and what might happen to you and your reputation.”

Having no appetite for an extended legal drama, Tough Mudder reluctantly settled out of court. “In a funny, roundabout way, the experience did us a big favour, because it forced us to really to put the pedal to the metal,” he recalls. “I’m not sure we would have grown as quickly as we did had it not been for all that we went through back then.”

It wasn’t all uphill in the early days. Funding has never been a problem, for instance. “Because participants pay us in advance, we’ve always been able to use those revenues as working capital, so growth has always been organic,” Dean says. Indeed, in the book he describes repaying his \$100,000 student loan in one hit after Tough Mudder’s first event.

The more you listen to Dean, the more the pop-up tattoo parlours at the finishing line start to make sense. The bonding aspect of Tough Mudder

participation, he says, makes the product very well suited to corporate outings.

“The days of taking everyone to Twickenham and all having champagne cocktails together are maybe starting to waver,” he says. “Tough Mudder is such a leveller, with everyone getting dirty together and so on. In companies it’s so easy for silos to form and then for miscommunications and other challenges to arise. Steve Jobs famously put one block of toilets in the centre of the building to force these chance encounters. Tough Mudder is simply an extreme version of that.”

He continues: “We live in an age where we’re spending more and more time playing on our smartphones and using social media. We’re connected to people, but we’re increasingly lonely and disconnected as well. People are doing fewer things with other people. Fewer of us are going to church, joining political parties, trade unions, rugby clubs, golf clubs and so on.”

Tough Mudder, Dean argues, gives people a welcome break from this isolated state, offering true togetherness. “We have no winners or prizes,” he says. “Everyone recites a pledge on the start line: they understand it’s not a race; it’s a challenge – and they’ll put camaraderie before their course time. It’s all about helping each other through it.”

#### Enduring culture

Of course, none of this community dynamic would be possible without the right corporate culture to support it – something that Dean takes very seriously indeed. The recruitment policy that he and Livingstone have established is based on one very basic principle.

“We hire only people we’d have dinner with,” he says, adding that experience in the events industry is not a prerequisite. “We generally favour smart generalists – candidates who are comfortable with ambiguity – over those who think they’ve been there, done that. There’s no such thing as a great place to work; there are only good fits. Tough Mudder is a great fit for some people and a terrible fit for others.”

Most candidates approach Tough Mudder via the careers page on its website, although in recent years Dean has used search firms when filling senior



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vacancies. “They can be very effective in getting you in touch with people you wouldn’t reach otherwise,” he says.

Passionate about staff development, Dean has created an internal “university”, where he and 15 to 20 employees gather each month to analyse case studies ranging from Microsoft’s innovation strategy to Innocent Drinks’ approach to storytelling. Toyota’s kaizen principles of continuous improvement have had a strong influence on the company credo – to the point where recipients of awards for initiative, clear thinking and owning up to mistakes are called “kaizen ninjas”.

An unlimited holiday scheme, meanwhile, means that people can take extended breaks if they fulfil all their year’s professional objectives.

“You can’t just build a good culture and then hope that it maintains itself,” he says “You have to constantly weed out issues and keep explaining why small things matter,” Dean says, citing the “broken windows” criminology theory, which posits that a failure to address vandalism and other low-level antisocial behaviour in a community makes it a fertile breeding ground for more serious crimes. “A lot of people think company culture is about beers in the fridge or foosball tables, but it isn’t. It’s about behavioural norms.”

Dean is big on self-improvement too. Online viewing of Ted talks is a favourite pastime. Brené Brown’s presentation on the power of vulnerability and Joseph Pine’s on what consumers want are two that he’s taken a lot from in

particular. He has also engaged a management coach to collect feedback from members of his executive team.

“This makes things more honest,” he explains. “They can say: ‘Look: here are some things that are being said,’ and they can also ‘editorialise’ and say: ‘Here are the things I agree with and here are two or three things for you to work on.’”

As for a more recent challenge facing Tough Mudder, he wears his antipathy to Brexit on his sleeve. “The foreign exchange hit is real,” Dean says, adding that he genuinely fears having to relocate the native German speakers among his London-based workforce.

But isn’t the task of maintaining authenticity as the firm continues to

grow so quickly an even bigger obstacle? “Our adherence to our founding principles is constantly policed by the Mudder community,” he says. To aid this process, long-serving staffer Jesse Bull has been appointed senior vice-president of brand, a job that entails 24/7 online conversations with the community. Unsurprisingly, Tough Mudder’s Facebook following is vast and vocal.

The company’s feats so far have not sated Dean’s hunger for more. Variations on the theme – for instance, women-only event Mudderella, Mini Mudder for kids and a shorter version called TM5K – are continually being launched. The list of partner organisations – which includes Jeep, Volvic, Virgin Active and Help for



STYLIST: LAUREN MELIOR AT CAROL HINES MANAGEMENT; HAIR AND MAKE-UP ARTIST: AQA DOBOSZ AT CAROL HINES MANAGEMENT

GETTY IMAGES





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Heroes – will keep growing. The company is also opening gyms in the US, with plans to follow suit in the UK next year. It recently expanded its TV partnership with CBS Sports, while a series that aired on Sky Sports Mix this summer followed six British Olympians tackling three Tough Mudder events.

“We’re not just an events company now; we’re a sports media, entertainment and active lifestyle brand, Dean says. “How do you keep focused as you become an increasingly international business? We are going into Asia now. That’s great, but ensuring that our values are consistent and will be well understood is something that we spend a lot of time thinking about.”

Although he can see the hurdles, Dean is determined to press on. “You have to evolve and do new things,” he says. “A lot of companies get themselves into trouble because they think the old way of doing things will keep working for them. We’re seeing this now in the car industry’s long reliance on diesel and petrol.”

In many ways, Dean’s approach is symbolised by the principles of completing a Tough Mudder course: determined forward motion, adaptability and experimentation with new approaches. As he writes in *It Takes A Tribe*: “If you’re not growing, chances are you’re dying.”

Will Dean’s new book, *It Takes A Tribe: Building the Tough Mudder movement*,

is published by Penguin

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SUIT AND SHIRT: OUIVER BROWN; SHOES: GREYSON; CUFFLINKS: PERROUSE LONDON



Best wheel forward: Paralympian and broadcaster Ade Adepitan was one of a number of celebrities who participated in the inaugural Virgin Strive Challenge in 2014

## Overcoming obstacles

What makes endurance events so popular with business leaders?



At an event called the Fittest CEO Challenge last year, top executives swam, cycled and ran a gruelling race alongside elite athletes in the

Caribbean. On the twice yearly Virgin Strive Challenge, entrepreneurs and celebrities hike in the Swiss Alps for five days before cycling to the toe of Italy, swimming across the Strait of Messina to Sicily and trekking to the summit of Etna. Meanwhile, LinkedIn and Thomson Reuters sent hundreds of employees to Tough Mudder events last year, including very senior directors, according to Will Dean.

Business leaders are clearly flocking to endurance events – and it appears that there is more to entice them than a tidal wave of endorphins and adrenaline.

“Extreme challenges take you outside your usual boundaries and push you to accomplish something new,” says Rhonda Cohen (pictured), sport and exercise psychologist at Middlesex University and author of *Sport Psychology: The Basics*. “On a daily basis, executives demonstrate that they enjoy challenges and problem-solving, so participating in extreme sporting activities can also satisfy that inborn need.”

So the same personality types who are driven to succeed in business gravitate towards endurance events, but is there a chicken-and-egg scenario going on here too? Can these activities actually sharpen our commercial acumen?

“Extreme challenges help you to tweak business skills such as focus and handling competitive pressure,” Cohen says. “In addition, your memory stores visual records of accomplishments, which you can extract when faced with another tough situation. So you can redeem a memory from having engaged in, say, a Tough Mudder challenge to help you handle a new work-based challenge. These previous ‘safe fear’ experiences can reduce the uncertainty of a real fear at work, serving as a valuable coping strategy.”

The healthy body/healthy mind factor applies too, of course: the training required for endurance events is conducive to healthy weight maintenance and heart functioning. It helps leaders to unwind as well.

Cohen also notes the salutary benefits of having a non-professional goal to aim for: “It satisfies an actual psychological and physiological need to achieve and accomplish a new challenge, which you can talk about for years and inspire others with.”

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