

Looking for a challenge? Find it in City Chase Chicago

By Louis R. Carlozo | TRIBUNE REPORTER

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Take scoops of "Fear Factor" and "The Amazing Race," add a dash of "Survivor"-style obstacle course and top it off with cream of frat boy scavenger hunt, and you'll get a taste of City Chase Chicago, a sporting-event concoction taking place Saturday.

The [Chicago Marathon](#) this is not—though the event requires its own curious brand of endurance.

For most of the afternoon, teams of two will fan across the city, trying to meet 10 challenges. They might run or take a [CTA](#) bus, climb the [Navy Pier](#) towers (from the inside) or stuff a snake down their shirt. If it sounds silly, consider that more than 700 teams have thus far plunked down \$190 apiece for the privilege—with one winner headed to the National City Chase finals, a three-day event slated for the Oct. 10 weekend in New Orleans. From there, it's a shot at worldwide glory in Marrakech, Morocco, in November.

Jason Erkes, president of City Chase USA, stresses the event is all about fun. That said, "Without a doubt, everyone starts out hoping to win." Here's how Erkes described City Chase, now in its second year locally.

Q: How does City Chase work?

A: Teams of two get a clue sheet and a CTA pass. On that sheet, they'll get 30 challenges taking them all over the city, and they have to figure out the most efficient way to get around—whether by foot or by public transit. They only have to pick 10 points and get to the finish line, so you decide your own course. There are some mandatory points they have to do, but also some optional things we know will push their comfort zone.

Q: While you can't reveal the course, what can you tell us about this year's event?

A: There will be challenges that will get people wet, get them dirty, get them naked—and ask them to eat something that you might not find on a standard dinner table. We'll also challenge their fear of heights, fear of reptiles and challenge their minds intellectually.

Q: Reptiles? Do tell.

A: Last year, you had to do something with a python or a live alligator. These two well-built tough guys ran up and said, "What do we have to do?" Our reptile trainer said, "You have to put this 15-foot python down your shirt." Their faces just froze, and one of them had a tear roll down his eye. There was some banter between them as to who was going to do it, and afterward, the guy who did it was covered in sweat.

Q: What does the winner get?

A: There's no trophy. We don't promote the competitive aspect, as we want people to enjoy a full day of exploration. The winners get Palm smart phones. ... We also have a wacky-costume contest. The focus is more about the experience.

Q: For those with a competitive streak, what does it take to win?

A: You should be able to easily run a 5K race; you should know and understand the landscape of the city; you should be resourceful and think quickly. We encourage the use of technology too. We give contestants smart phones for different challenges. They'll text, take photos and use the navigational tools. Some teams even have someone at a [Starbucks](#), on a Wi-Fi, doing back-end research.

Q: Since starting in Toronto in 2004, City Chase has spread worldwide. Any thought of turning this into a reality TV show?

A: Absolutely. The Canadian [events] right now are a 10-part series on the CBC. This is our launch year in the United States, where we're in nine cities instead of one. We're getting our bearings, and if it works out, we'll try to secure a broadcast deal. The world championships in Rome last year were broadcast on National Geographic TV to [millions of] households worldwide—everywhere except the U.S.

Q: Where will the winner cross the finish line?

A: Joe's Bar on Weed Street [940 W. Weed St.], where the after party is. At the end of the day, not too many people remember it was a competition. It's just a lot of people gathering and telling stories; the room is filled with laughter.

Register at citychaseusa.com.

lcarlozo@tribune.com