

## Not for the meek

### CITY CHASE | Our reporter gets a leg up on one event in Saturday's competition

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750 teams are expected to compete in the Chicago City Chase this weekend. Last year's contestants showed their prowess in handling reptiles, rappelling and kayaking. Lower left: Reporter Misha Davenport steers the harness racing pacer Thursday.

*(Sun-Times/Courtesy)*

#### CHICAGO CITY CHASE

**When:** 9:30 a.m.-4 p.m. Saturday

**Where:** Starts at Daley Plaza, 50 W. Washington

**Fee:** \$190 per two-person team

**Registration:** Today at [citychaseusa.com](http://citychaseusa.com); Saturday on site starting at 8 a.m.

The whole city will become an urban jungle gym Saturday for the Chicago City Chase, expected to draw 750 two-person teams in a competition that's part scavenger hunt and part "Fear Factor."

Beforehand, at a makeshift horse track in a secret location, I'm getting a taste of what teams will go through in at least one challenge.

"We look at the landscape of the city as a blank page and try to come up with some unique activities," says Jason Erkes, president of City Chase USA, which puts on the races. "The reality-inspired events we've come up with this year are designed to push people's comfort zones and at the same time profile the city's urban landscape."

I'm definitely out of my comfort zone. I've never been on a horse before (unless you count a pony ride when I was a kid -- and I don't). And I'm being asked to hop into a buggy and take the reins of a filly from Hawthorne Racing School named Plezen Mr. Hacker.

Al Kopiec, a trainer from the school, is riding shotgun and gives me the basics on how to steer the pacer. As I strap on the required helmet, I'm thankful I'm not rappelling from the top of Navy Pier like teams had to do last year.

It's the second year Chicago has hosted the event. Each team will be given 30 clues. The clues lead to challenges that will be located throughout the city, including the course I am currently trying to navigate.

Erkes says the challenges are an equal mix of the physical, the mental, the adventurous and the humorous.

"The uniqueness of this is that people sign up and have no idea what they are in for," he says.

They can travel on foot or use the CTA, but all other modes of transport are illegal. The first team to successfully complete 10 challenges and cross the finish line at Joe's Bar, 340 W. Weed, earns a place to compete with the winners of other races held throughout the States in the National City Chase, to be held in October in New Orleans. The winning team from that race wins a trip to Morocco to compete the next month in the World Championship City Chase.

Take it from last year's local winners, Chicagoans Ted Commes and Aza Quinn-Brauner. Both 25-year-olds say prior skills, knowledge and athletic ability aren't requirements.

"We decided to enter the Chase last year a couple of days before, and both of us weren't in good shape," Quinn-Brauner says. "You do a lot of running, but physical shape is only part of it. There is always an element of luck."

Having nerves of steel helps, too.

"Last year, two really muscular contestants got to one challenge involving a python, and one of them starting crying," Erkes says with a laugh.

Last year's race featured challenges in the Loop, Chinatown, Wrigleyville and Lincoln Park, among others. This year's locations are being kept under wraps, but Erkes did give one hint.

"Several of the Chase points will have live animals this year, including two things we've never done before in the history of City Chase."

Plezen and three other horses will be on hand Saturday. Here's hoping Plezen will be in a more cooperative mood. Though the horse began at a decent clip around the course, she eventually stopped, turned around and headed back to the start. Contestants must drive their steed for a full circuit to complete the challenge -- and they'll be at the mercy of the horse.

Commes and Quinn-Brauner, lifelong friends, are looking forward to the chance to defend their title. "We thought it would be fun last year, but we had no idea how much fun it would be," Quinn-Brauner says.

"City Chase is really fun," Commes says. "They up the challenges on the national and international level. I really want to compete in those, so we really need to win."

The pair assembled a chariot and ran a mini-race in Rome at last year's world championships (they placed fifth) and even engaged in a game of strip bowling last year in Chicago.

"Naked bowling -- that was kind of out there," Commes says

Quinn-Brauner explains, "You had to bowl a strike, and if no strike, you had to remove an article of clothing. We had been running around for hours, we were tired and neither one of us is really good at bowling."

The duo is a formidable threat this year. Last month, Commes and Quinn-Brauner placed second in a City Chase held in Boston -- not bad for a city that neither one of them had visited before.

Of all the challenges the two winners have encountered, they say there isn't a single one that they wouldn't do again.

OK, maybe one.

"In Rome, they made us put on these Borat-style bikinis and we had to swim into the water, complete an obstacle course, dig up a wheel for a bike and then drive on the interstate for four miles," Quinn-Brauner says. "Members of the Australian and English teams actually got pulled over and arrested for indecent exposure by the police."

He adds with a laugh. "I'm not sure I'd want to do that one again."