

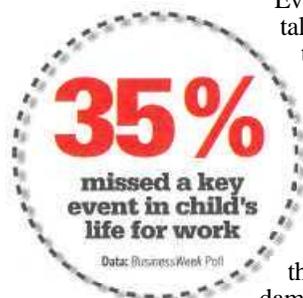
Yes, Winning Is Still The Only Thing

As this new century unfolds, the competitive urge is increasingly aimed at excelling in everything you do—but not necessarily at the expense of others

BY DIANE BRADY

OF COURSE IT'S ABOUT THE MONEY. But Stephen A. Schwarzman built The Blackstone Group into one of the world's largest private equity firms also for the thrill of it. "People have to understand that the game really is to compete and win," says the chief executive, who raised a record \$15.6 billion for one recent fund. Rupert Murdoch, the driven chairman of News Corp., likes to put a face to his battles—going after individual foes such as Viacom's Sumner M. Redstone and CNN founder Ted Turner. Then there's actress Jamie Lee Curtis, who says she learned to read upside down "so I could see [on casting agents' lists] what other actresses were coming in for auditions." And when legendary Dallas Cowboys passer Roger Staubach played baseball as a boy, nothing pleased him more than coming to bat with two players out and runners on second and third base: "I looked at it as an opportunity."

Everyone likes to win. Beneath all the talk about teamwork and balance, all the books on being kind and cultivating emotional intelligence, people still crave to be the best. Call it passion, drive. In the world of competition, few battlegrounds are more intense than the one with the self. The hunger to reach the top, regardless of the obstacles that stand in your way, remains a fundamental force in the success—and, at times, the dark side—of the human race. In a special *BusinessWeek* poll of 2,500 American workers, two-thirds said "a modestly talented but extremely competitive person" would be more likely to get ahead at their companies. Only one-third gave the edge to "an extremely talented but uncompetitive person."



But what motivates people to compete is changing. During the 1950s and '60s, the goal was to climb the corporate ladder. There were winners, and clear losers, along the way. The pursuit started to become more personal during the '70s and beyond, as the Me Generation channeled its energies into making money and finding new ways to be No. 1. Women came charging into the corporate world, often feeling pressured to adopt a workaholic style. Ambition became synonymous with single-minded, and many combatants allowed their obsession with winning in one area to lay waste to other parts of their lives. Noted gerontologist Ken Dychtwald, author of *Age Wave*, recalls one common thread among highly successful entrepreneurs he met several years ago: misery. "Their kids were junkies, their wives had left them," says Dychtwald. "They had one horrible story after another."

Winning on All Fronts

AS THIS NEW CENTURY unfolds, though, the competitive urge is aimed increasingly at winning in everything you do—and not necessarily at the expense of others. Leadership today involves motivating people, not killing them. Flatter organizations reward performance rather than tide. And more people pick the places where they compete, easily moving in and out of jobs, industries, or even the workplace altogether. "Measuring success against others is a moving target [and] a road to burnout," argues leadership consultant Patrick Lencioni. Now, adds Keith Ferrazzi, author of *Never Eat Alone*, "it's about distinguishing yourself." Beating your neighbors simply isn't enough.

Today's competitors want it all—career, family, and adventures that push them to new highs. That's why Martin E. Franklin, chairman and CEO of Jarden Corp. (maker of everything from Dia-

JACK BLACK



Steve Ballmer

Microsoft's CEO has been known to speak first and ask questions later. He eviscerated employees and belittled mate-but says he's now toning it down.

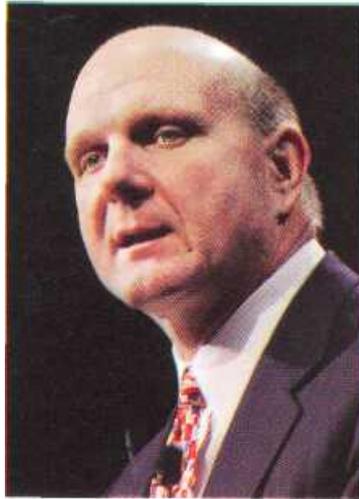


I don't think of myself in the upper echelon of competitive people I've ever met. My wife finds

that beyond humorous. But I've been in environments where people were quite competitive, whether going back to my high school, to college, to the people I worked with as a manager of the football team [at Harvard]. I've been around quite competitive people in my life. But I'm certainly a competitor—there's absolutely no doubt, and I think I'm a very good competitor. I wouldn't want to compete with me. But there are other good competitors out there, too. At the end of the day, I care about our customers. I want them to use our products. I care about the value we add. The only way we get to play is if people choose our stuff.

Of course, competition is the thing

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that drives everybody to do their very best work, and it's the very best work of competitors that winds up bringing the very best value to customers. So I start with the fundamental premise that says competition is a great thing. At the end of the day it's a measure of the quality of your work. It's like getting a grade. People say they don't like grades, but at the same time people like to know where they stand. If you get picked over a competitor, you know where you stand. And if you don't, you also know where you stand.

mond toothpicks to Coleman camping gear), aggressively acquires companies and trains for Ironman competitions. "For me, it's all about seeing how far you can go, be that in business, in helping people, or in athletics," says Franklin, minutes after landing in the sweltering heat of Death Valley, Calif, to test out the Kiehl's Badwater Ultramarathon, a 135-mile race that's dubbed the most extreme on the planet. "It would be a very sad day for me to say I can't do more."

Indeed, constantly trying to best previous successes is the hallmark of some of the most competitive people in the world. Witness the sometimes finger-numbing zeal with which young musicians from around the world work to perfect their performance and outplay one another at the Meadowmount School of Music in the Adirondack Mountains (page 68). Or the intense discipline that prompted 19-year-old Santosh Kumar to borrow books, sell vegetables, tutor others, and study his way into the prestigious Indian Institutes of Technology, becoming a hero in his rural village in the northeastern province of Bihar (page 74). He's competing for a life no one in his family has ever had.

Like Kumar, members of today's connected generation increasingly are driven to achieve more than their peers. Katie Nolan, 22, notes that when her rowing mates at Bates College agreed to stick together in a charity run, it didn't work. "We all started racing against each other," says Nolan. Teamwork is great, but "we've been raised to believe we'll succeed in a big way."

Rivals make the game more challenging, serving as momentary roadblocks or even fuel. Although Donald Trump likes to brag about his prowess against the likes of fellow TV star Martha Stewart, his focus is more on the mirror. "I think of myself as my biggest competitor," says Trump. He seems to tally every piece of positive press, every rating point for his TV show, on a mental scorecard that may be complete only when his body is in a casket (one brand extension Trump actually refused to put his name on). And Indy 500 racer Danica Patrick even treats the people beside her when she's going up a set of stairs as rivals. "I compete in everything I do," she says. "It makes me do my best."

What drives these people? Dopamine, perhaps, since scientists have found that activities such as winning tend to prompt a release of the feel-good brain chemical (page 58). Veteran executive coach Marshall Goldsmith notes that the most chronic issue facing competitive people is "their excessive need to win not just the big points but the small points." So they attack a debate over where to eat with the same intensity as they negotiate a takeover.

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Yes, ambition can run amok. The world is full of people who compete in destructive ways, from despotic politicians to greedy corporate titans. That's the dark side of competitiveness, and those killer instincts are often fueled by insecurity, desperation, or vindictiveness.

Revenge is indeed a powerful motivator. Witness the primal drive that has underpinned the comebacks of executives such as Millard S. "Mickey" Drexler, who refused a massive payout after being pressed to leave retailer Gap so that he could make his mark by reviving rival J. Crew (page 64). Other people may not even know what they seek—but whatever it is, they don't want others to get it first.

Immune to Failure

TO BE SURE, YOU NEED more than competitive spirit to win. Adrenaline and ambition are useless tools without the right strategy and talent. As Justin Menkes, author of *Executive Intelligence*, puts it: "A lot of people run full speed with incredible urgency in the wrong direction." And sometimes there just aren't many prizes being handed out. Consider the stakes for being hired by one of the country's top quant funds: Even with filters like an 800 math SAT score and top grades in math, physics, or computer science at the world's most elite schools, the odds of getting an offer can be just 1 in 500 (page 66).

What true competitors have is a remarkable immunity to the prospect of failure. It's simply not a factor and, when it happens, it doesn't take them out of the game. Amid this single-mindedness and the sweat and the zealous disregard for obstacles often stands a spirit of indefatigable optimism. These people pursue the prize because they are sure they can get it. They're less afraid of striking out than not taking every possible turn at bat that comes their way. "Successful people are delusional," says Goldsmith. "They're not as good as they think they are, but they have the confidence to pursue big things."

In short, they are the kind of people you want on your team. When somebody is passionate and driven by the pursuit, he tends to inspire passion in others. And fortunately for those less driven, most

competitors are less interested in bringing others down than in raising themselves up. These aren't the victims or complainers who have been beaten by life. More often than not, they like their bosses. In fact, they want to be the boss some day and often turn him or her into a mentor to help them get to the top. Whether racing to discover an AIDS vaccine or sweating to make it big in Beijing, this century belongs to the people who want the most. II

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Anne Mulcahy

The CEO of Xerox Corp. tells her sales force of 8,000 that they'll win more selling what's great about Xerox than by dissing the competition.



Competition gives you a

focus. Lots of times you need a mission, a bulls-eye that keeps you focused, and competition can do that. A passion for winning when it's focused on a strong competitor provides a lot of incentive and passion and pride for people. But having said that, it can't just be about competition. There's a whole stream of ways to be successful,

and some of that is by focusing on competition and some of it is by taking advantage of opportunities that haven't been exploited.

Generally speaking the toughest competitors are the ones that embed themselves in customer relationships. It's never just about what they sell. It's about the trust that they've established with the

customer that says no matter how good what you have is, it's very difficult to unseat that trust. That's really what we're trying to do.

We take apart every element of a competitive [product] to assess the strengths and weaknesses and how we can compete to win. We literally have teams of people who gather, collect, and prioritize competitive information and send out competitive alerts. And when it's important to, [we] create the workshops that are required to arm people with the knowledge of how you win against a particular competitive offering. You have to invest in and develop the capability to systematically acquire competitive information very quickly and be able to react and respond to it.

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