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City Chase starts here

INTERNATIONAL COMPETITION | Local group's urban race

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With business on solid footing in town, the Chicago Sport and Social Club is grabbing the rings of an international competition it hopes will bring it more sponsorship dollars as it grows in the U.S.

The club on Saturday launches the U.S. component of City Chase, an international "Fear Factor"-ish contest that will have teams of two criss-crossing the city to complete adventures/tasks such as rappelling from the towers at Navy Pier or getting cozy with a 16-foot-long python. More than 400 teams have signed on for the contest.

Production of the urban race is the latest example of the growth the organization has seen since Jason Erkes and nightclub owner Marc Bortz bought it from StreetZebra.com in 2001, when they played in its leagues. The largest of its kind, the club gets about 70,000 active adults playing during the year.

"Anyone who stood on the beaches and saw the thousands of people who played each week in these leagues knew it was valuable," said Erkes, club president and former television news producer.

Team participation has increased by about 64 percent over the past five years. This year, the club is up to 5,000 teams, which fork over \$400 to \$1,200 each to participate. Individuals pay \$75 to \$125.

The club provides about 20 sports and related activities throughout the year, double the amount offered in 1999, with the additions of kickball, dodge ball, rock climbing, kayaking, fitness boxing and yoga.

The "social" part of the club's name hasn't been neglected, with about 100 bar parties, concert outings and other mingling events each year, more than double the number it was doing five years ago.

Last spring, Erkes relaunched chicagosocial.com to prompt more interaction off the fields and courts.

Last month, it produced the Volleywood Beach Bash, a one-day volleyball tournament and beach party at North Avenue Beach. DJ AM worked the party, as about 4,000 young adults took over the sand that high school and young kids usually run on summer weekends.

"People are constantly looking for new ways to be active socially and physically," said Erkes, 37. "It appeals to young professionals looking for outlets after work and on weekends to go out and be social with their friends."

With that, he's fielding interest from sponsors yearning for the demographic of young, urban-dwelling professionals.

The Chicago operation boasts multiyear deals with Coors Light, Wilson Sporting Goods and New Balance athletic wear. Other companies, including Burrito Beach, Bacardi and Pontiac, sign on for specific activities.

"We have the eyes and ears of tens of thousands of 21- to 35-year-olds," he said. "Automobiles, waters and energy bars are all trying to get their products in the hands of these active-minded professionals."

The company has linked with City Chase (citychase.com), a Canadian-based events company, to produce and market U.S. contests.

Chicago hosted the 2006 world championship event for City Chase, which seeks locations that don't offer participants a home-city advantage. But this week marks the first time that a U.S. city will host a regional arm of the game, which started in 2004.

The winning Chicago team will represent the U.S. at the world championship contest in Rome this fall.

Erkes' company, which also owns clubs in San Francisco; Philadelphia; Orlando, Fla., and Dallas, will get paid based on participation and sponsorship.

"With the success of all the reality TV shows that push people's limits, there's a lot of people itching to try stuff like this and spend a day traveling around their city," he said.