

Smart Athletes Get Attention of This CEO

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Kevin O'Connor

A friend currently is attending a 2-week pharmaceutical sales training program where he's surrounded by former athletes. During the interview process, he was asked questions about his participation in sports in high school and college. He now knows this particular company places a premium on people who know how to compete.

Two executive recruiters confirmed the growing focus on individuals who enjoy competitive sports, both as individuals or members of teams. I recall friend Bill Heyman, head of Heyman Associates, telling me several years ago not to worry about my younger son who devoted most of his free time to sports, mostly swimming, water polo and triathlons. Bill was right. My son, Brad, hasn't had a problem landing good jobs in the media and PR. Brad leaves his PR job this week at the International Triathlon Union in Vancouver and moves to San Diego where on Oct. 1 he'll start a new gig as editor-in-chief of Lava, the magazine covering Ironman.

These discussions came to mind today as I read the New York Times' Corner Office interview with Kevin O'Connor, CEO of FindTheBest.com, a comparison search engine. O'Connor also is a founder and former CEO of DoubleClick. During the process of interviewing job candidates, O'Connor says he likes to get beyond the expected answers. "I try to keep them off balance," he said. "I try to give them a question that feels like a two-by-four between the eyes."

"I'll start off with, 'How smart are you?', O'Connor said. "People get really uncomfortable. They don't know what to do, and they don't know how to answer it. They know it's kind of a trick, and it flusters them. Or I'll take a look at something that they did, and I'll tell them it's a big mistake and then just see how they react. Do they start crying? Do they get in a terrible rage and argue with you, or do they come back and systematically tell you why you're wrong, or perhaps agree with you on certain areas? So, I'm looking for that."

When asked what he wants to hear from candidates, O'Connor said: "Ultimately, we're looking for what I call smart athletes, people who have raw intelligence. Some of the best people I've worked with didn't go to great schools. It's not necessarily about what skills they have because the most interesting problems are the ones that nobody's ever faced before — especially in a start-up, but really any company."

O'Connor added, "I really love competitive people. I get nervous when someone has never put themselves in a competitive situation."