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What CEOs and Founders Have Learned From Sports

Whether they play now, did in school or just count themselves fans, these 14 bosses have used sports to learn about collaboration and what it means to win.

By: Kate Krader
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Illustration by Gwendal Le Bec

Welcome to CEO Diet, a monthly series in Bloomberg Businessweek in which executives from around the world tell us how they manage their time in and out of the office. Among the topics they've discussed: what they learned from their first job and their own end-of-year goals, plus how they optimize their sleep routine and use artificial intelligence to save time.

The drive to overcome adversity and collaborate to win are invaluable skills no matter what playing field you're on. For bosses and founders, sports can have a long-lasting impact on their professional lives, whether its as a current or past participant or a

passionate onlooker. For one chief executive officer, playing padel mirrors the instincts he finds himself using in business. For another, watching her daughter play flag football provides a powerful lesson in leadership. Here, 14 bosses reflect on how they apply the lessons of sports in the office too.

"Sport has shaped my entire life," says Alex Kendall. He's the CEO of Wayve Technologies Ltd, the British robotaxi company that was valued at $8.6 billion in February and launched its first autonomous rides in collaboration with Uber Technologies Inc. in September. "Growing up surfing inspired Wayve's name, and captaining field hockey teams gave me my first lessons in leadership." But he's learned the most from mountain biking, which he's done since he was a kid in New Zealand. "When you encounter a challenging obstacle, it's usually better to speed up rather than slow down. I carry that with me in my role today: the feeling of standing on the side of the Southern Alps, unsure of what's ahead and knowing the only way through is to accelerate, execute and enjoy the ride."

As CEO of reservations platform OpenTable Inc., Debby Soo has a primary focus in the restaurant world. Her home base and company headquarters are in San Francisco; still, she was cheering for the New York Knicks in the 2026 NBA finals and found a lot of job inspiration in their run up to the championship. "The New Knicks, and how the top three players negotiated compensation for the three of them as opposed to one star player getting all of it, was the ultimate underdog story," she explains. "They won the championship because of grit, no egos and really playing like one team."

"I've been swimming competitively for almost 30 years, and the most prominent lesson it's taught me is patience," says Elliott Parker, CEO of Alloy Partners, a startup builder and launcher based in Indianapolis whose portfolio has raised $200 million. "You won't get faster with sheer willpower. You have to put in the time and the work and show up, for the same laps, trusting that improvement is happening even when you can't see it." He expands on his Zen-like approach: The gains you will make require practice and perseverance because "bad technique gets punished no matter the effort you put in. When it's just you and the black line at the bottom of the pool, you have to trust the process and keep kicking."

In 2011, Aleen Dreksler co-founded Betches Media, the female-focused media company that now boasts more than 250 million users across various platforms. Her top sports takeaway is from a spectator's perspective, but one that aligns with her core mission at Betches: "Watching the rise of girls' flag football shows the transformative power of changing who gets to lead on the field. It's a sport built on speed, strategy

and unshakable confidence, showing young women that leadership belongs to those who step up and claim it." Her interest is personal too: "My daughter plays, and I'm obsessed by what I'm seeing — the bravado she brings to the field, the pride and excitement it brings to her mom and dad."



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Michael Liebowitz, president and CEO of real estate powerhouse Douglas Elliman LLC, finds synergy between his favorite sport and his job. "Padel has become an important outlet for me because it requires many of the same instincts I rely on as a CEO, but in a completely different environment." He lists the reasons: "You have to play with a partner and collaborate, read the court and your opponents, anticipate what's coming and make decisions quickly, while constantly adjusting." Unlike some bosses, he even likes that you can't control every point or minute of the game. "You make the best decision you can, reset and move forward. When you're leading a business, particularly in an industry that moves as quickly as real estate, that ability to stay focused, adapt and not dwell on the last point is incredibly valuable."

"I played attack in lacrosse in high school, and I think I still run a business a little like I played," observes Julian Buckner. He's the founder and CEO of Vesta Home Interiors Inc., the largest luxury-home staging, interior design and furnishing company in the US. "You're constantly trying to create an advantage somewhere. Move the ball, draw a slide, get someone out of position and attack the opening. You need a strategy going in, but once the whistle blows, you can't possibly have planned for everything. You have to read the field, react to what's actually happening and adjust in real time." Sometimes, Buckner says, the best thing you can do isn't to take your own shot, but to

create an opening for somebody else. “I think that translates pretty directly to building a company and leading a team,” he concludes.

Donald Moore is the CEO of goop kitchen, the clean-food delivery-focused arm of the Gwyneth Paltrow lifestyle brand. In April it expanded its reach from California to New York. He shouts out soccer as the sport that’s taught him life lessons. “It’s the world’s game for a reason. All you need is a ball and a patch of grass — no money, no equipment, no barriers. Anyone can play,” he observes. But Moore has got more to say about it. “The sport is a constant lesson in grit and self-discipline, showing how the work you put in when no one is watching is exactly what shows up when it matters most.” He maintains a group chat with members of his high school soccer team, and they still show up for each other, he says. “This sport creates a special bond that is hard to find anywhere else and builds relationships that last a lifetime. It’s a mental and physical test every single time. The game doesn’t care how you feel that day. You learn to compete anyway.”

“I am not an amazing tennis player, but picking it up again after 30 years has taught me that you don’t have to be great at something to love it,” says Kat Schneider. She’s the founder and CEO of popular wellness brand Ritual, which specializes in supplements and vitamins for women. “I spend my life in high-stakes environments that reward constant competence, so tennis provides a rare, necessary relief where I can make mistakes without consequence.” It’s a powerful reminder for her that failure isn’t the end of the world. It also allows her to remember the joy of being a beginner at something. “I often think about my three daughters while I’m on the court, hoping to model for them that it’s OK to try things you aren’t good at. Ultimately, it’s a vital reminder to let go of the fear of looking silly and just have fun.”



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Ray Chan is the CEO of digital investments company MemeStrategy Inc., as well as the co-founder of 9GAG Ltd., the Hong Kong-based social media and entertainment company. He, too, has found big takeaways watching his kid compete on the field. "My 4-year-old son has just started playing T-ball, and watching him swing at that ball on a stand — wide-eyed, often missing entirely — has made me reflect on baseball in a way I never did as a casual fan." Chan isn't just watching his child, though: He's observing everyone on the field and their interactions. "What strikes me most is how the sport rewards different bodies and skills. A shortstop needs range and quick hands; a first baseman needs power and reach; a pitcher needs precision over raw strength." He says it's a good lesson in business too: "You need the right fit for the right role to have a balanced team. Success comes from everyone executing their role, inning after inning, not relying on a lone superstar only to have your bullpen collapse."

For Giorgio Sarné, the CEO of Montblanc, the 120-year-old luxury pen and bag company, the lessons you can learn come not from playing the game or necessarily even watching it — it's what happens afterwards. "I am becoming mad about the postgame interview after the big NBA match or other big events," Sarné says. "When you start to listen to what these people go through, you understand nothing is by chance. I learn so much about passion, discipline, professionalism, respect for the team, respect for others and understanding your weaknesses."

In 2006, Camilo Miguel Jr. founded Mast Capital Inc. As CEO of the company, he's developed prestige South Florida properties like the Cipriani Residences Miami and Banyan Tree West Palm Beach. Playing high school football was his formative sports experience. "It taught me lessons that have stayed with me throughout my career," he says. "You learn very quickly that success requires perseverance, discipline and a commitment to excellence. You have to show up every day, put in the work and stay focused on the goal [even] when things don't go your way. That mindset has carried directly into how I approach business. Set ambitious goals, commit fully and keep pushing until you get there."

Since early 2016, Jason Chinnock has been CEO of the cult motorcycle manufacturer Ducati North America. He's been a fan of riding since he was a kid, inspired by Evel Knievel and the desert racing he watched in Nevada. Chinnock has raced ever since; earlier this year he rode a 1971 Ducati in the Biltwell 100, a 100-mile off-road race in California's Mojave Desert. "The lessons I've learned from racing translate directly into leadership," he says. "Business, like riding, rarely follows a perfect line. You have to adapt, stay focused and keep learning. Even after more than 20 years in this industry, I

believe that the moment you think you've figured everything out is the moment you stop growing."

From his headquarters in Glasgow, Scotland, Speyside Capital CEO Paul Kopec directs international investment in Scotch whisky from barrels to bottle; in 2024, he opened an office in Mumbai. But he's singularly focused on his home country's soccer team. This year in particular, he says he's picked up valuable lessons. "I'm a lifelong Scotland football fan, and I was lucky enough to attend my national team games at the 2026 FIFA World Cup across the United States in July," he says. "What stayed with me wasn't only what happened on the field, but the way Scotland arrived on the other side of the Atlantic and somehow brought a little of the country with it." He sees similar principles at work in his day job. "Football has taught me that people connect with stories long before they connect with products. History sells, but only when it is presented authentically — and Scotland does that particularly well through our warmth, humor, hospitality and willingness to share a dram or two."

Tim Brackney is the CEO of the accounting company Springline Advisory Inc., backed by private equity firm Trinity Hunt Partners LP. "My experience with football has greatly influenced my leadership philosophy, and I can still hear Coach Lutero's voice imploring us to do our part and work together as one," he says. "Football teaches you quickly that while individual talent matters, the best teams succeed by aligning, trusting and committing to something bigger than themselves. The strongest organizations, like all the greatest sports teams, aren't built around one person." And, Brackney adds, "success on the field, or in business, is about what people can accomplish together."

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