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Challenge shows firefighters in action

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Competition, expo paired for first time

By Hiram Soto
UNION-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

July 15, 2007

MISSION VALLEY – While many San Diegans were shedding layers of clothing at the county's beaches yesterday, firefighters from across the nation were putting on pounds of clothes and equipment at the Firefighter Combat Challenge and Fire Expo at Qualcomm Stadium.

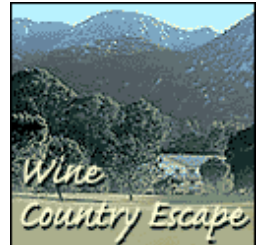
Hundreds of people showed up to cheer them on as they competed in five consecutive, grueling firefighting tasks, including racing up and down a five-story tower, hoisting, chopping and dragging hoses.

"It was terrible. You want to collapse," said firefighter Peter Ransom, 41, from the Colorado South Metro Fire Rescue, who finished the competition in slightly more than two minutes.

The firefighters with the best times go on to participate in regional and national competitions.



EDUARDO CONTRERAS / Union-Tribune
Shane Simpson, a firefighter from Apple Valley, competes in a forceable entry simulator during the Firefighter Combat Challenge Saturday at Qualcomm Stadium. U.S. and Canadian firefighters competed.



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The event, in the stadium parking lot, was more than about beating a time.

It featured a procession of nearly 100 firetrucks and engines with their lights and sirens on. Families who turned out for the Fire Expo mixed fun and education by playing games and learning how to avoid fire accidents at home.

That made Colleen Dollens happy considering that her 3-year-old son Graham is already obsessed with firefighters.

“It’s good that he hears tips from someone else other than me,” Dollens, 34, said as her son listened to a firefighter talk about fire dangers in the kitchen.

Besides listening, children got to hose down a member of the San Diego Fire-Rescue Department’s hazardous material unit – in a full chemical protection suit – with foam. They also got to walk inside mobile communications centers and fire engines.

This was the first year the Expo was paired with the combat challenge, which is held annually at 25 locations across the country.

“We’re trying to prove that we can compete and provide quality service for our constituents,” said Don Butz, chief of Viejas Fire Department, which had six firefighters compete.

People were impressed with what they saw and heard.

“The competition is actually very educational,” said Oscar García, 28, a City Heights resident who came to see the firefighters in action. “You learn things that you only see on TV and you never really know how they do it in real life.”

The event was free to the public, but proceeds from the sale of food and T-shirts went to the Burn Institute, a nonprofit that offers fire and burn prevention education, burn care research and treatment in San Diego, Imperial, Riverside and San Bernardino counties.

The organization was presented with a \$300,000 check from the San Diego-Imperial County Firefighters Advisory Council.

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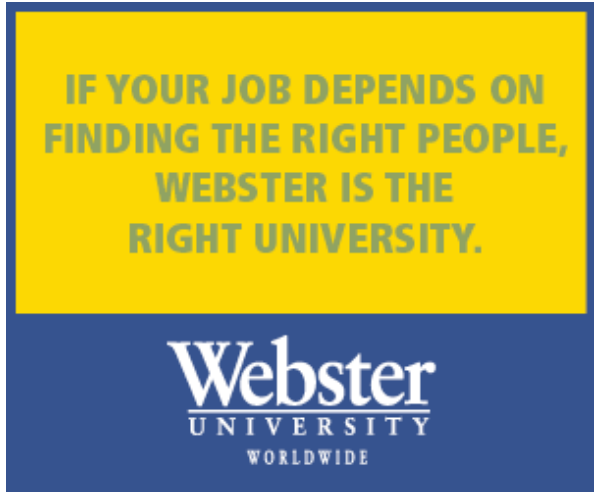
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