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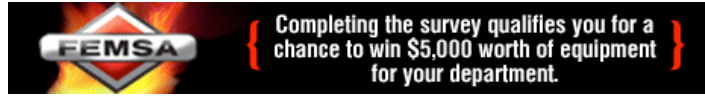
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Combat Challenge Showcases Firefighter Skills

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CARA SOLOMAN
The Seattle Times

There is a place Brandon O'Neil has to go, before he climbs a five-story tower, hauls a weight up with a rope, hits a steel beam with a mallet, shoots at a set of doors with a fire hose and rescues a 175-pound dummy called Randy.

That place is called the Ready Tent. He dreads it, every time he does this obstacle course.

"It's where all the nerves and tension explode," said O'Neil, 28, a senior airman and firefighter at Elmendorf Air Force Base in Alaska.

The Firefighter Combat Challenge drew hundreds of visitors yesterday to Pioneer Square for what ESPN has billed as "the toughest two minutes in sports."

Firefighters from across Washington competed against colleagues from several other states and British Columbia, hoping for slots at the final competition in Nevada this November.

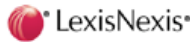
It was a highlight of this year's Fire Festival, which returned after a six-year hiatus following the Nisqually Earthquake. The three-day festival, which ended Saturday, featured displays of antique fire trucks, educational exhibits and a film series.

The Combat Challenge, a national phenomenon, began decades ago as a standardized test for firefighter candidates. Since then, it has often been televised on ESPN, a showcase for the skill and strength it takes to fight fires. In Saturday's events, the first Challenge hosted in Seattle, four teams from Washington made the top 10 and two from Seattle qualified for nationals.

The firefighters compete alone and in teams, wearing full gear and carrying 40-pound weights on their backs at one point. By most accounts, pulling the dummy is the toughest part. It comes at the end, when endurance and energy are inevitably running low.

"Your brain's freaking out, and you've still got to drag this hunk of meat down the road," said Todd Matthews, 40, of the Seattle Fire Department.

As with any contest, months of practice did not always produce a personal best. Some firefighters fell and got caught underneath the dummy. Others stumbled on the stairs going up the tower. Even when they did achieve a personal best, some struggled to enjoy it in those first moments



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after finishing the course.

"Horrible," said Alan Heddings, 36, of the Seattle Fire Department, as his wife rubbed his back. "I feel horrible."

For spectators, there was excitement and tension and more than a little gawking. Earlier in the morning, Susan Hermes, 57, and her sister Diane Johnson, 59, stood on a table by the tower, trying to get the best view.

Their husbands were elsewhere. Their cruise through Alaska left in a couple of hours. They wanted to see the contest first.

"Wow!" the women said, and "Look at that!" and "Oh, my!" Tourists from Missouri, they raised their cameras to the scene. Hermes could not imagine doing any of those tasks. "I could imagine bringing some of those boys home," she quipped.

But she was most impressed by the three teams of women two from Idaho and one from the Port of Seattle. Karine Aebi, 37, of Idaho said she trained months for the contest, in between her regular hour-and-a-half workouts, six days a week.

"It's difficult, but that's why we do it," said Aebi, a member of the Idaho Lady Heat Seekers team, which placed first among the women's teams and is headed to the national competition.

The challenge of firefighting in general has her hooked. The brains it takes, and the strength, plus the feeling of doing good. And training for the contest was rewarding, she said, because it brought her closer to other female firefighters in the county.

"Sisterhood, man," said teammate Jen Cowdin, 29, with a smile. "It's all about sisterhood."

It's that sense of family Steven Seward misses, among so many other things, now that he is retired. He stood Saturday by the antique fire engines, snapping photographs. A 300-pound ladder hit his back and cut his career short several years ago.

He had logged in nearly 30 years with the Los Angeles Fire Department, working riots in the inner city and plane crashes at the airport. There was such sadness in the work that what he saw he could not even compare to his service in Vietnam.

"There's something about it you accept," said Seward, 58, who lives in Lynnwood now. "You don't get used to it."

Friends and family on Saturday said they focused on the good parts of the job, and tried to block out the risks. Standing on the sidelines, 67-year-old Judy Milner waited for her son to compete. She had driven all the way from Wenatchee to see him; Michael Milner placed second in the over-40 category.

There was a time when she worried so much about what could happen to him on the job. But she sat down with him several times and discussed all the precautions he was taking. He reassured her. And he said: If anything ever happens, you'll know I died doing what I love.

"I don't worry anymore," she said.

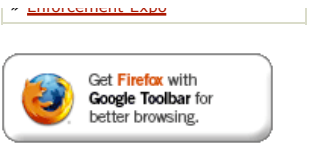
Cara Solomon: 206-464-2024 or csolomon@seattletimes.com

Contest results

How teams and individuals scored: <http://new.firefighterchallenge.com/>

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