

LOCAL

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Firefighter 'athletes' to tough it out downtown

Challenge is part of festival commemorating Great Fire of 1889

By AMY ROLPH
P-I REPORTER

"The toughest two minutes in sports" is a phrase you'll hear a lot hanging out by the Firefighter Combat Challenge course temporarily erected in Pioneer Square. That's what competitors and fans like to call the event happening Saturday afternoon, and they might be on to something.

After all, the average athlete might balk at the thought of scaling a five-story tower while wearing a fireproof suit and dragging a 45-pound hose. And they probably wouldn't be too keen at the idea of schlepping a 175-pound dummy around an obstacle course, either.

But that's what about 170 firefighters from the Northwest U.S. and Canada will do -- all in the spirit of friendly competition.

"I'd like to think most firefighters could do it," Parker Ruby said on Friday afternoon. The Idaho Falls, Idaho, firefighter will compete in Seattle with a team from his department.

In theory, most firefighters could complete the course in five to seven minutes, Ruby said. Firefighters competing on Saturday's challenge will average a time of about two minutes, with the fastest recorded time clocked in at one minute, 19 seconds.

About 60 firefighters from the Seattle Fire Department will compete both on relay teams and individually, Seattle Fire Department spokeswoman Helen Fitzpatrick said.

The competition is returning to Seattle for the second consecutive year as part of the city's annual Fire Festival, which commemorates Seattle's rebirth after the devastating fire of 1889. The fire is believed to have started in a carpentry shop near what is now Pioneer Square before spreading to burn almost 60 city blocks.

It wasn't until after the city burned to the ground that a non-volunteer fire department was created.

Saturday's festival, coordinated largely by the Pioneer Square Community Association, takes place from 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. near Occidental Park. The combat challenge will run for the duration of the event.

Among other things, the festival will also include live music, a noon sports-team mascot rally, a 1 p.m. hot-dog-eating contest and a daylong "fire sale" at some businesses. For a complete list of events and locations online, visit goto.seattlepi.com/r854.

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