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Smoke eaters test their skills

By Juan Perez Jr.
world-herald staff writer



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Cole Henn of the Lincoln Fire Department drags a dummy Sunday in the Firefighter Combat Challenge on the parking lot of the Old Mattress Factory in north downtown Omaha.

Julianne Friedrichsen, an Omaha firefighter, spent Saturday night on duty, responding to a host of 911 calls around the city.

Sunday morning, Friedrichsen, on the mend from bronchitis, donned her gear and headed to a north downtown parking lot to try something she had never done before: competitive firefighting.

It was the second day of the Scott Firefighter Combat Challenge in Omaha, a grueling event centered on an obstacle course that tests a variety of firefighting skills, as well as endurance and brute strength.

More than a dozen teams of firefighters from around the region arrived to battle for bragging rights and a chance to compete in the circuit's world championships in Las Vegas next month.

"I'm definitely not the most competitive person," Friedrichsen said.

Many of her colleagues are. More than 3,000 competitors from 640 fire departments compete in similar events held throughout the country each year, according to organizers.

Sponsors from public safety industries help fund the circuit's events, which are typically attended by hundreds of screaming fans and occasionally broadcast on national television.

Here's how the competition works:

Competitors first don 50 pounds of protective equipment, including a large oxygen tank. They must then hoist a 42-pound pack of hose on their shoulders and climb the stairs of a five-story tower. At the top, competitors use a rope to pull another 42-pound pack of hose up the side of the tower, then race back down.

Once they return to the bottom of the tower, firefighters use a mallet to hammer a 160-pound block of steel until it moves five feet. Then they sprint 140 feet to the opposite end of the course, drag a water-filled hose another 75 feet and spray it at a small target.

Finally, competitors drag a 175-pound mannequin 106 feet to the finish line. The firefighter with the fastest time wins.

It takes firefighters an average of 3 minutes, 3 seconds to complete the course.

John Woolery, a 32-year-old Omaha firefighter, finished the course in 1 minute, 38 seconds Saturday.

He won the weekend's individual competition and helped a five-man squad of Omaha firefighters win the team relay event Sunday. The barrel-chested group will face the world's best firefighting crews in November.

Friedricksen manned the hose during her team's Sunday relays and grinned the entire time. She'll be back next year, though she plans to train more before the next competition.

"I need to discipline myself," she said. "It's fun, and you want to do well for your team."

Contact the writer:

444-1068, johnny.perez@owh.com

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