HOT WEEKEND

Skills put to test, for fun

Firefighters compete in combat challenge in downtown Erie

By JULE GARDNER
jule.gardner@times-news.com

The crowd went six-deep to get a look at the athletic prowess of firefighters in 2003.
They roared for the home team, which didn't place.
Things are a bit different this year, as Erie gets ready to host the Firefighter Combat Challenge, in which teams and individuals complete obstacles in a race against the clock, a second time.
The relays and individual competition will be spread over two days—Friday and Saturday—instead of being crammed into one long and exhausting day for the competitors.
And this year the home team looks a lot stronger.
They trained longer and harder and have become friendlier with the demanding course, dubbed by one ESPN broadcaster as the "toughest two minutes in athletics."
Six from the Erie Bureau of Fire who competed in a Manassas, Va., qualifier similar to Erie's, have already made it to the World Challenge in Las Vegas, which will be aired on ESPN.

Bruce Eicher, a 49-year-old lieutenant with Tower Co. 2, qualified as
an individual after shaving nearly 30 seconds off his 2003 time. Individual men between the ages of 40 and 60 must complete the course in less than three minutes to advance. Eicher did it in 2:24. "It was a total surprise," he said.

Also going to Worlds is Erie's "Team Gorzynski," named in honor of Rick Gorzynski, a firefighter and well-known local athlete who died of pancreatic cancer in January.

Team members Darren Hart, Bryan Delio, Joe Russo, Tim Romanoski and Bob Majczyk completed the relay course in 1:24, automatically qualifying them with an under-90-seconds performance.

"A lot of work went into that time," Eicher said.

A lot of work has also gone into bringing the competition to Erie. Because of that, this could be the last year for the competition unless some sponsors step up early, Eicher said.

Eicher, Hart and Delio have largely been in charge of the preparations, along with Tammy Roche, manager of the mayor's Office of Cultural Affairs. And they're exhausted.

The firefighters, as they did in 2003, hustled for sponsors and lined up hotels, parties and activities for the visitors while trying to train, live their lives and go to work.

After the 2003 event, Erie got a reputation on the circuit as one of the better host cities. Its closeness to Canada brought some formidable competitors. And visiting firefighters said Erie was a lot more than they expected.

The Erie crowd also helped. They showed up in large numbers and stuck around for the entire day's competition.

The success in 2003 put some pressure on organizers to make it as good or better.

And then there's Sept. 11.

The individual competition in Erie is on the third anniversary of the terrorist attack that killed more than 2,800, including 343 firefighters in and around the World Trade Center in New York City.

The unofficial start of the competition starts tonight. A reception at the Central Fire Station on West 12th Street will welcome competitors who arrive early with subs, burgers, salad and "beers all around."

On Friday, WFDF-FM/Froggy 94 will host the "Last Blast of Summer," a free concert in Perry Square, which is next to the Challenge course. The team competition, called the Coors Light Streamlight Relay, begins at 7 p.m. After that, competitors can attend another party at the Pufferbells Restaurant, located in the old firehouse at East...

Firefighter Darren Hart pounds on a Keiser sled with a mallet, part of the course at the Firefighter Combat Challenge. Hart was among a small group of firefighters who helped plan the challenge's events this weekend, including a memorial service for the victims of Sept. 11.