THE Sun
ALLISON LOEBS, 48, a firefighter from Malletts Bay, Vt., sends the water flying during the individual competition at the New England Firefighters Challenge at the Tsongas Arena in Lowell yesterday. Loeb has been a firefighter six years and competed in 15 Challenges.

Firefighters push to limits — and beyond — at N.E. Challenge

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LOWELL — The pain on Lowell firefighter Mike Grandalski's face is visible through his helmet shield as he drags the dead weight of a 200-pound, fully charged hose 75 feet through the swinging doors.

To get to this point, he has run up and down five stories, carrying 42 pounds of hose on his left shoulder and hoisting another 42 pounds of hose up from the ground to the top of the building demands hammering a 160-pound beam a distance of 5 feet with a 9-pound mallet.

The soft rhythm of air being sucked from the 19-pound tank strapped to his back is the only audible sound as Grandalski opens the line, releasing a powerful stream of water to douse the flames licking at his boots.

A boost of adrenaline propels him forward as he sprints 140 feet around obstacles, his body encased in 50 pounds of protective equipment.

Then, Grandalski discovers 175-pound Randy, lying motionless on the floor. He grabs the victim under his arms and, running backward, pulls him 106 feet out of the burning building to safety.

Wilmington firefighter Chuck Taylor,
Firefighters put themselves to test for blazing glory

rescue, in 2 minutes and 31 seconds.

It is not a real fire, but it is as close as the public can get to viewing the rigorous tasks firefighters are asked to perform daily, without actually entering an inferno. It is a reminder that time is a firefighter's most dangerous enemy, as a blaze doubles in size every 90 seconds.

Grandalski and 93 other firefighters from up and down the East Coast and Canada gathered at the Tsongas Arena yesterday for the first day of the New England Firefighters Challenge.

This was no chili cook-off. Known as the "toughest two minutes in sports," the individual Firefighter Combat Challenge pits dozens of the most athletic, physically and mentally strong firefighters against each other, themselves and the laws of physics.

Wilmington firefighter Chuck Taylor stumbles backward over the finish line, carrying the Rescue Randy mannequin, completing the course in just over 21⁄2 minutes. The "pit crew" assembled at the line lifts him to his feet, removing his heavy helmet, breathing apparatus and jacket.

"Feeling ... all right," says the burly Taylor, 43, gasping for air. He pauses to wipe the sweat from his red face. He grabs a bottle of water in the rehab tent, where fellow competitors are outstretched on cots like war wounded.

This is Taylor's fourth shot at the challenge, his first since 2001. The six sets of stairs on the tower gave him the most difficulty.

"I sure didn't practice that," he says.

Taylor had been training extensively at Wilmington's Competitive Athlete Training Zone in the weeks leading up to the challenge, but did not expect to have to carry the 42 pounds of hose on his left shoulder, having trained for his dominant right shoulder.

"I felt good doing the sledge hammer, I just couldn't believe how much time the tower took," he says.

Taylor agrees that the demands of the challenge mirror those encountered by firefighters battling structure fires.

"Nobody knows what we do," he adds.

The crowd of more than 1,000 gathered on the arena grounds grows anxious as the 2006 world champion, Brandon Cunningham, of the Fort Gordon, Ga., Fire Department, crouches into starting position.

The siren wails and he shoots up the stairs like a bullet out of the barrel of a gun, his purple-mohawked orange safety helmet bobbing up and down.

As quickly as he started, he is done. A remarkable 1 minute 27 seconds.

"It was OK," the competitive Cunningham says of his time.

The New England Firefighters Challenge continues today from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. on the grounds of the Tsongas Arena, with the tandem and relay competitions, as well as the kids' firefighter-challenge course, a Lowell firefighting historical exhibit and the National CPR Challenge.

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