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Firefighters compete for fun in Pioneer Square

By **AMY ROLPH**
P-I REPORTER

Pioneer Square was swarming with firefighters Saturday afternoon, and there wasn't a puff of smoke in sight.

Two at a time, they climbed, they hammered, they dragged and they carried -- all the things that make up a tough day at work for most of them. But this time, life and death wasn't hanging in the balance.

This time, it was just for fun.

About 170 firefighters competed Saturday in the Firefighter Combat Challenge held for the second consecutive year in Seattle. The competition has become the main attraction at the city's annual Fire Festival, which commemorates Seattle's rebirth after the devastating fire of 1889.

Competing firefighters raced against each other for the fastest time, with the quickest usually clocking in at less than two minutes. About 60 firefighters from the Seattle Fire Department competed on relay teams and individually, Seattle Fire Department spokeswoman Helen Fitzpatrick said.

Many of the firefighters, visiting from throughout the northwest and from British Columbia, are the biggest and brawniest their departments have to offer, but that doesn't mean they weren't gasping for breath by the time they dragged their 185-pound dummy over the finish line -- the final part of the obstacle course.

Rob Lemon, a 290-pound firefighter from Delta, B.C., was still catching his breath several minutes after he completed the course with a time of one minute and 45 seconds. It was his second year competing in the Combat Challenge, and to him, his score meant one practical thing.

"It means I'm ready to do my job," said Lemon, 31.

The participants train hard for the event, the average firefighter probably couldn't complete the course in two minutes or less, they say.

The race starts when the competitors -- each wearing about 75 pounds of gear, including fireproof suits, oxygen tanks and masks -- race up 14 flights of stairs to the top of a five-story tower. They haul a 75-pound hose loop to the top and race back down to the street to move a 250-pound weight 12-inches by swinging a hammer at it.

At the opposite end of the course, they pick-up a live fire hose, drag that several yards and knock down a target with the hose's spray. Finally, they drag a life-sized dummy about half the length of a city block to the finish line.

"When you're done with that, it's time to catch your breath," Lemon said as he change out of his gear near the course, set up at the north end of Occidental Park.

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At the south end of the park, another combat challenge was taking place -- this one for the youngest future firefighters.

Isaac Jewell and Diego Gray, both 5, raced against each other on the less-strenuous version of the course, and there weren't any hard feelings between the friends when Isaac finished first.

There were, however, newly reinforced aspirations of growing up to be a firefighter.

"I love spraying water, I love carrying the hose," Isaac said.

Saturday's Fire 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 runs for the duration of the event.

Among other things, the festival includes live music, vendors and daylong "fire sales" at some businesses. For a complete list of events and locations online, visit goto.seattlepi.com/r854.

P-I reporter Amy Rolph can be reached at 206-448-8223 or amyrolph@seattlepi.com.

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