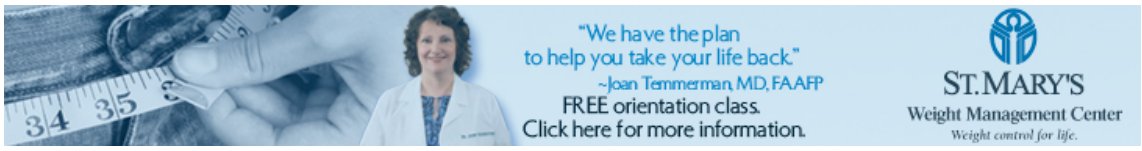

Local News

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Firefighters' challenge heats up

From tower races to Rescue Randy, competitors race against the clock

By Rich Davis (Contact)
Sunday, September 30, 2007

BOB GWALTNEY / Courier & Press
Henderson, Ky., firefighter Andrew Deardorff, left, cools off as he is cheered by teammates Willie Curry, center, and Jordan Kreisle after competing in the Firefighter Combat Challenge on Saturday in Evansville. Deardorff had just finished running a course.

Andrew Deardorff hits a target with a burst of water as he competes in the challenge on Saturday.

Chris Cerci and Paul Weinburgh sounded like NASCAR drivers talking about point standings on Saturday, except one had a distinct Boston accent — and they race towers instead of cars.

How do you race a tower?

You take two firefighters wearing 50 pounds of gear (face mask, air tank, etc.) and time them as they run up opposite sides of a five-story tower. Each man carries a 42-pound load of hose over his shoulder as hundreds of people in bleachers begin to cheer.

At the top, each puts the hose into a black box and hoists up another roll of hose before descending. Back on the ground, each pushes a 180-pound steel beam with a sledge hammer, then races in a zig-zag motion through fire hydrants before shooting a water hose at a target. Finally, each drags a 175-pound mannequin, known as Rescue Randy, backward for the final 100 feet to the finish line.

Out of breath yet?

That's what 150 firefighters from all over the United States are doing this weekend during the Firefighter Combat Challenge on Evansville's riverfront.

The event near the Four Freedoms Monument on Riverside Drive is one of about 20 regional competitions leading to the national finals in Atlanta in October and the world championships in Las Vegas in November. The defending world championship team is from California's Travis Air Force Base.

Relay and tandem events start at noon today. Events will end around 4 p.m. Around 2 p.m., there'll also be the "Battle of the Ohio" pitting firefighting relay teams from Evansville against Owensboro, Ky. Evansville won last year, but Owensboro's Byron McDonald has been racking up some fast times.

Cerci, 40, of McKeesport, Pa., and Weinburgh, 41, of Boston, arrived in Evansville tied for first (147 points each) in the 40-and-older division.

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Saturday afternoon, Cerci pulled ahead in the national standings (172 points) by taking second place in the 40-and-older competition with a time of 1:49; Weinburgh came in fourth at 1:54, leaving him at 167 points.

"It's like NASCAR," said Weinburgh, noting he came to the Evansville regional because he knew Cerci would be here, and he enjoys all the camaraderie. "You don't have to be the fastest. It's all about consistency (the number of high finishes).

"I'm not the fastest guy over 40, but this is fun," said Weinburgh, who got into the competition about a year ago "when I weighed 240 pounds. We had a couple of fires, and I felt like crap. This (competition) was a motivator. I think I'm 20, but I'm not. I wanted to get in good shape. I weigh 225 now."

Firefighters travel and compete by taking personal time off from work and finding sponsors. Cerci's is Stihl, the chainsaw manufacturer, while Weinburgh's is Zoll Medical, which supplies defibrillators.

Saturday's best score (1:31:34) came from 36-year-old Dan Stevens, a brawny, blond firefighter from Anchorage, Alaska. So far this year in every competition he's set a new personal best.

"He's got as good a shot as anybody (at the national title)," said challenge announcer Rex Nimrad.

Stevens agrees he's getting closer to the top tier — the handful of firefighters who can do the course in less than one minute and 30 seconds. A world title can take a time of 1:20 or less.

Last year, Stevens' time at Evansville was 1:52, but he's worked hard to improve. He and his three Anchorage teammates use the steps of an Olympic-size ski jump to simulate the tower.

When someone says Stevens has the arms of a body builder, he laughs.

"You see guys doing this who look like body builders, but it really has to do with your conditioning, although you've got to (be strong) to hold up Rescue Randy."

At his first challenge three years ago, Stevens had a time of 2:04 and was exhausted.

"I thought I'd never do it again, then the competitive side kicked in. I kept saying 'If I just do this.' It's addictive."

You can find scores from the Evansville competition at www.firefighterchallenge.com.

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