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Greensboro's Jackson is among fastest FFs

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Greensboro, North Carolina - So you think you're tough?

Sheri Jackson is tough. Tougher than you, anyway.

And she's got the title - third-fastest female firefighter in the world - to prove it.

The Greensboro firefighter finished third in the world last month in the women's division of the Scott Firefighter Combat Challenge, which aired on ESPN2. Here's what Jackson had to do:

Sprint to the top of a five-story tower while lugging a 42-pound rolled-up hose.

Use a rope to haul a second hose to the top of tower.

Run down the tower, touch every step, and drive a 160-pound steel sled five feet with a 9-pound mallet.

Weave through a series of hydrants to grab a fully charged hose, then pull it 75 feet back, burst through swinging doors and squirt a target.

Wait, there's more. With legs wobbling and lungs burning, drag a 175-pound dummy 100 feet to the finish line.

"You can't walk - you can't breathe - when you're done," said Jackson, who weighs 35 pounds less than the dummy.

No wonder: Jackson competed while wearing full firefighters' gear, complete with an air tank and a mask.

And she finished the course in 2 minutes and 24 seconds, a personal best.

Like we said: Tough.

Jackson's time would have won the whole thing last year, event emcee Rex Nimrod said. Firefighters from Canada and Georgia were just a little faster this year.

"She's better than good," Nimrod said of Jackson. "She's a world-class athlete in every sense of the word."

Jackson entered the Firefighter Combat Challenge for more or less the same reason she joined the Greensboro Fire Department nearly two years ago: It would test her skills, and then some.

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"I said, 'Heck, I'll try one and see how it is.' And I liked it," Jackson said. "I like being able to do something that not a lot of people can do."

The challenge is very similar to actual firefighter training drills, something Jackson excelled at. She had seen the challenge on television, and several Greensboro firefighters have taken part in the past.

To train, Jackson worked out at Station 7 in a room where the weight machines share space with two couches and a television set. Sometimes she dragged a dummy around the station parking lot or did step-ups on the back of the fire trucks.

Jackson burned comp time, an hour at a time, to practice at the fire department's training center on North Church Street. One drill was running up the fire tower's steps with a 20-pound weight vest and an air tank on her back.

On her days off, Jackson turned heads at the Alex W. Spears III Family YMCA by angling the treadmill as high as it could go and walking backward while clinging to a 45-pound weight.

"Crazy stuff," Jackson said.

Tough stuff.

For finishing third, she won a flashlight, a plaque and congratulations from one of the event's sponsors. There was no prize money: Just the satisfaction of beating her personal goals.

At the start of the season, she hoped to break the 2:30 barrier and make it to what competitors call "ESPN Day," the final day that will be shown on the sports television network twice this week. She accomplished both last month.

"Did I expect to walk away with third? No," Jackson said. "That's definitely not something I expected."

Jackson plans to compete again next year. Money is one issue because she shelled out her own cash to travel to most of the events. Another is her new goal. She has not yet decided how high she will aim.



There is one thing Jackson does know.

"You know it's going to hurt," Jackson said, "but you do it anyway."

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