

# She's turning up the heat

## Female firefighter thrives on competition

Sheri Jackson doesn't mince words about how much it hurts. "You have to force yourself to do something you know will be brutally painful," she explains. "It's the most awful thing you'll ever put your body through. When you get done, you can't walk."

She's talking about timed competitions for firefighters, where they haul heavy equipment up a tower, drag hoses and rescue life-size victims.

"I don't know how many times I've had to tell myself not to quit," Sheri says.

"It's physically challenging, but it's so much more of a mental challenge."

The 34-year-old former Janesville and Edgerton resident is showing her steely grit after less than two years of being a full-time firefighter.

She competed in the world championships of the Scott Firefighter Combat Challenge in Las Vegas and took third overall in the women's division.

A firefighter in Greensboro, N.C., Sheri matched strength with firefighters from across the United States and Canada in mid-November.

The grueling challenge aims to simulate the physical demands of real-life situations.

In part, here's what she and others had to do in what ESPN calls "the toughest two minutes in sports":

- Climb a 60-step hydraulic tower while carrying a 42-pound hose and wearing up to 65 pounds of full bunker gear, including pants, coat, air pack, helmet, mask, boots and gloves.

- Bend over a railing at the top, hoist up a 42-pound hose and place it into a container.

- Run down the tower and leap onto a machine that simulates chopping action. Swing a 9-pound mallet to drive a 165-pound steel beam backward 5 feet.

- Run 140 feet around six fire hydrants, then run back 75 feet while carrying a pressurized hose. Switch on the hose to shoot a target, and then turn off the hose and place it on the pavement.



**Anna Marie Lux**  
BETWEEN THE LINES



Submitted photo

Former Janesville and Edgerton resident Sheri Jackson recently competed in the Scott Firefighter Combat Challenge in Las Vegas. A member of the Greensboro (N.C.) Fire Department, Jackson has been a firefighter for less than two years. In Las Vegas, Jackson completed the course in 2 minutes, 24 seconds to finish 11 seconds behind the winner.

# Jackson/Woman answers challenge

Continued from 1B

■ Drag a 175-pound mannequin, named "Rescue Randy," backward 100 feet to the finish line.

Sheri, who has been a firefighter for less than two years, did it all in 2 minutes, 24 seconds. She was 11 seconds behind the winner.

Sheri attended Janesville's Craig High School before finishing high school and college in Greensboro. She got into fire fighting after a challenge from a former boyfriend.

"He was trying to get into it, then decided it wasn't for him," Sheri recalls.

She applied to the city of Greensboro for the 17-week training school.

"The hiring process is extensive," Sheri explains. "I figured eventually they would say, 'We're sorry.' But I kept jumping over their hurdles."

Greensboro requires candidates to pass oral interviews, physical and psychological exams and a physical-abilities course modeled after the firefighter challenge.

"Our department is one of the hardest in the country to get into," Sheri says.

She graduated from training in July 2003.

The next weekend, she took part in a regional fire-fighting challenge in Janesville, organ-

## TO WATCH

ESPN2 will air the Scott Firefighter Combat Challenge at 3 p.m. Sunday, Dec. 19. Sheri Jackson, formerly of Janesville, placed third overall in the women's division.

ized by firefighter Kevin Murray.

Sheri and her parents—Susan Welsh of Greensboro and Dennis Jackson of Janesville—are friends of Murray. Sheri also babysat Murray's children when she was young.

Murray wasn't surprised when he learned how well Sheri did in the world competition.

"She's just tenacious when she sets her mind to something," he says. "She's a real athletic person."

He called her achievement "a credit to her and all women."

It didn't come without sacrifice. For 11 months, Sheri trained for the competition.

"It's been the only thing I've focused on since last December," she says. "It's been my life."

For the first 16 weeks, she worked out more than two hours a day. Then, she started doing it twice a day, beginning with sprints at 5 a.m. and weightlifting in the afternoon.

Later, she trained up to three times daily, six days a week.

Three months before the competition, Sheri practiced

challenge events using the department's tower and other equipment.

She explains her intense motivation.

"Part of it comes from the fact that I'm a female in a male-dominated field," Sheri says. "Females can be well received, but there are a few old-boy networks still out there. I wanted to prove that I can drag a man out of a fire even though I'm a female, who weighs 145 pounds."

The 5-foot-10 Sheri says fewer than 20 members of the 425-strong Greensboro Fire Department are women, and only a handful rides the trucks.

"Maybe I can help the next woman who comes into the fire department and has to go through rookie school," she says.

Sheri understates her ability to do well in fire-fighting competition.

"It's just what I do," she says. "The fact that I do it well reflects that I do my job well. I've been told it's a big deal, but I know I can do it faster."

"We'll have to wait until next year."

*Anna Marie Lux is a columnist for The Janesville Gazette. Her columns run on Sundays, Tuesdays and Thursdays. Call her with ideas or comments at (608) 754-3311, Ext. 264. Or e-mail her at amarielux@gazette-extra.com.*