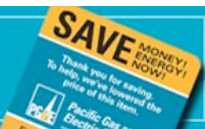


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## Fremont firefighters reach great heights in competition

By Matthew Artz, STAFF WRITER

Article Last Updated: 08/06/2007 06:30:05 AM PDT

FREMONT — Last year's Fremont Firefighter Combat Challenge ended on a sour note for the home team.

The boys from Fremont Fire Department scrapped their way into the finals of the team relay race only to get smoked by the three-time world champion, the Travis Air Force Base Fire Department.

It didn't seem like anyone could best the military men on the obstacle course — where firefighters, wearing 50 pounds of equipment, race up a five-story tower, pull a 42-pound hose to the top of the tower, run back down the stairs, hammer a 160-pound sled to simulate ripping open a roof, weave in and out of obstacles carrying a 140-pound hose and finally drag a 175-pound dummy 106 feet.

But a lot can change in a year in the world of competitive firefighting.

One of Travis' top performers was out with a broken hand. And another left the military for the Union City Fire Department.

"We're not the same team," Dave Chiodo, Travis captain, said before the tournament.

Meanwhile, Fremont entered the competition on a roll, winning its last two major competitions in Seattle and San Diego.

Just like last year, the two squads fought their way to the finals.

But on Sunday, it was Fremont fire that led wire to wire, finishing the course in just under 1 minute, 15 seconds — a full 2 seconds ahead of Travis.

"This feels awesome," Fremont Firefighter Justin Earls said right after carrying the 175-pound dummy across the finish line.

"It's

great to win it before the hometown crowd," teammate Brian Guernsey added.

OK, a cynic could say that many of the several hundred people in attendance were relatives of the firefighters, and the sport is sometimes broadcast at an ungodly hour after a lumberjack competition.

Still, anyone who thinks Fremont won't have an imprint in professional sports until Cisco Field is built, consider this: While the A's flounder in third place up in Oakland, the Fremont Fire Department is now ranked No. 1 in the nation and is among the favorites at this year's world championships in November.

"We're on an incredible roll," Guernsey said.

They even have corporate sponsors. The team is now officially called the North Bay Truck Body Team after the Cordelia-based firm, which helps pay airfare and hotel accommodations for the tournaments. The Jelly Belly Candy Co. is also a major sponsor.

As for its performance, the team credits much of its success to their friendly adversaries at Travis Air Force Base in Fairfield. The Fremont team trains twice a week at the base, which has Bay Area's only five-story tower identical to that used in the competition.

While the Travis team helped encourage Fremont to get involved in tournaments, Fremont is now recruiting its neighbors. Hayward has formed a team, which trains with both Fremont and Travis.

The workouts build endurance and mental toughness, Hayward Firefighter Eric Vollmer said.

"You know when you start climbing that staircase that within two minutes you're going to feel a lot worse than you felt before," he said.



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