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HOT WEEKEND

Skills put to test, for fun

*Firefighters compete
in combat challenge
in downtown Erie*

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The crowd went six-deep to get a look at the athletic prowess of firefighters in 2003.

They roared for the home team, which didn't place.

Things are a bit different this year, as Erie gets ready to host the Firefighter Combat Challenge, in which teams and individuals complete obstacles in a race against the clock, a second time.

► The course: What it takes to compete.
5A
► If you go: Times, places.
5A

The relays and individual competition will be spread over two days—Friday and Saturday—instead of being crammed into one long and exhausting day for the competitors.

And this year the home team looks a lot stronger.

They trained longer and harder and have become friendlier with the demanding course, dubbed by one ESPN broadcaster as the "toughest two minutes in athletics."

Six from the Erie Bureau of Fire who competed in a Manassas, Va., qualifier similar to Erie's, have already made it to the World Challenge in Las Vegas, which will be aired on ESPN.

Bruce Eicher, a 49-year-old lieutenant with Tower Co. 2, qualified as



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Challenge: Firefighters put skills to the test, for fu

Continued from 1A

an individual after shaving nearly 30 seconds off his 2003 time. Individual men between the ages of 40 and 50 must complete the course in less than three minutes to advance. Eicher did it in 2:34. "It was a total surprise," he said.

Also going to Worlds is Erie's "Team Gorzynski," named in honor of Rick Gorzynski, a firefighter and well-known local athlete who died of pancreatic cancer in January.

Team members Darren Hart, Bryan Delio, Joe Russo, Tim Romanski and Bob Majczyk completed the relay course in 1:24, automatically qualifying them with an under-90-seconds performance.

"A lot of work went into that time," Eicher said.

A lot of work has also gone into bringing the competition to Erie. Because of that, this could be the last year for the competition unless some sponsors step up early, Eicher said.

Eicher, Hart and Delio have largely been in charge of the preparations, along with Tammy Roche, manager of the mayor's Office of Cultural Affairs. And they're exhausted.

The firefighters, as they did in 2003, hustled for sponsors and lined up hotels, parties and activities for the visitors while trying to train, live their lives and go to work.

After the 2003 event, Erie got a reputation on the circuit as one of the better host cities. Its closeness to Canada brought some formidable competitors. And visiting firefighters said Erie was a lot more than they expected.

The Erie crowd also helped. They showed up in large numbers and stuck around for the entire day's competition.

The success in 2003 put some pressure on organizers to make it as good or better.

And then there's Sept. 11.

The individual competition in Erie is on the third anniversary of the terrorist attack that killed more than 2,800, including 343 firefighters in and around



ROB ENGELHARDT/Erie Times-News

Firefighter Darren Hart pounds on a Keiser sled with a mallet, part of the course at the Firefighter Combat Challenge. Hart was among a small group of firefighters who helped plan the challenge's events this weekend, including a memorial service for the victims of Sept. 11.

the World Trade Center in New York City.

None of the firefighter/competitors coming to Erie this weekend are from New York. That's understandable, Eicher said.

But Erie will honor the victims with a solemn service. It starts at 10:30 a.m. Saturday. A bagpiper, color guard, members of the Erie bureaus of fire and police and uniformed medics with EmergencyCare will line the competition course at South Park Row and State Street.

Retired Deputy Chief William Vahey will ring the 5-5-5 fire code on a bell — three sets of five rings — to remember the dead while LifeStar flies over.

"We didn't plan it for that day," Eicher said. "It happened to fall on that day this year, and we want to, obviously, honor it and be respectful."

The unofficial start of the competition starts tonight.

A reception at the Central Fire Station on West 12th Street will welcome competitors who arrive early with subs, burgers, salad and "beers all around."

On Friday, WFGO-FM/Froggy 94 will host the "Last Blast of

Summer," a free concert in Perry Square, which is next to the Challenge course. The team competition, called the Coors Light Streamlight Relay, begins at 7 p.m. After that, competitors can attend another party at the Pufferbelly Restaurant, located in the old firehouse at East

IF YOU GO

- **What:** Coors Light Firefighter Combat Challenge
- **Where:** South Park Row, State to Peach streets
- **When:** Relay team competition Friday, 6:30 to 9 p.m.; Individual competition Saturday after Sept. 11 memorial service, 10:30 a.m.
- **What to bring:** The family. Kids can test their inner combat challenger at the Kids' Crawl Drag & Squirt competition on Friday and Saturday.

Fourth and French streets.

On Saturday, the Sept. 11 memorial ceremony will be followed by the individual compe-

tion, which begins at 11

More than 200 firefighters are expected to compete. Five of them are from Erie.

It's all very exciting, said, "but at this point, I'm only looking forward to Andy's Pub, 3866 Peach Street, which will host the "real" party after the races are done.

Volunteers are still needed for both the Friday and Saturday competition. Free T-shirts are part of the deal. To find out more, e-mail Eicher at LtLadTwo@aol.com.

The planning has been a lot of work, as has the training schedule. "I think we're going to have a better showing than last year. At least I hope we will."

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