

Sunday World-Herald



Pressure's high for event

Lincoln Firefighter Joel Johnson shoots water at a target during the Firefighter Combat Challenge Saturday at Oak View Mall in Omaha. Competitors from several states are taking part in the event, which ends today. Story on Page 3B

Just for fun, firefighters feel the burn

■ Dozens tackle a grueling series of tasks as a two-day competition opens in Omaha.

BY ELIZABETH AHLIN

WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER

Chris Irsfeld can't take his three kids with him to the office.

But they got the chance to see the Sioux Falls, S.D., firefighter in action Saturday at the Firefighter Combat Challenge at Omaha's Oak View Mall.

"It's kind of fun for them to catch a glimpse of what Dad does," said Irsfeld's wife, Kristi Irsfeld.

The children, ages 8, 6 and 3, were captivated as their father stood at the base of a tower, waiting for his cue.

With the go-ahead from the announcer, Chris Irsfeld and a competitor bounded up the staircases of the tower with 40-pound weights slung over their shoulders.

Ben Irsfeld, 3, jumped to his feet and yelled, "Let's go, Daddy!"

With video camera in hand, Kristi Irsfeld recorded the arduous ascent.

After her husband reached the top, he hoisted a rope attached to a 42-pound rolled-up hose.

Then he ran down the stairs, used a sledgehammer to move a 165-pound weight, pulled a hose about 50 feet and dragged a 175-pound dummy back that same 50 feet.

The competition, featuring dozens of firefighters, is meant to showcase their skills and replicate the physical demands of the



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THE WORLD-HERALD

Ryan Tex of Omaha, above, catches his breath after his race. At right, Stephen Brown of Lincoln drags a 175-pound dummy.

job. Primarily, the challenge is for fun, but some firefighters hope spectators will take more away from the contest.

"We want to educate the public as to how difficult our job can be," said Omaha firefighter Darren Garrean. "It takes a lot of strength, agility and endurance."

Firefighter Stacy Billapando of Colorado Springs, Colo., broke her own record in the women's competition.

"That was pretty cool to see that. She wasn't too far behind the guys," said spectator Kristi Byrkit of Lincoln.

In the end, Chris Irsfeld didn't win his heat and he didn't qualify for the world competition. But that mattered little to his father-in-law, Richard Hachten of Omaha.

"That is so grueling," Hachten said, shaking his head. "We're really proud of him."

This is the first time the regional firefighting skills competition has been held in Nebraska.

Saturday's competition pitted individuals against each other and the clock. Team competitions will be held today, begin-



ning at 11 a.m. at the mall parking lot.

Firefighters who finish with a qualifying time can go on to the world championship in Las

Vegas in November.

A qualifying time for men is 1 minute, 50 seconds or less; women must finish in 4 minutes, 30 seconds or less.