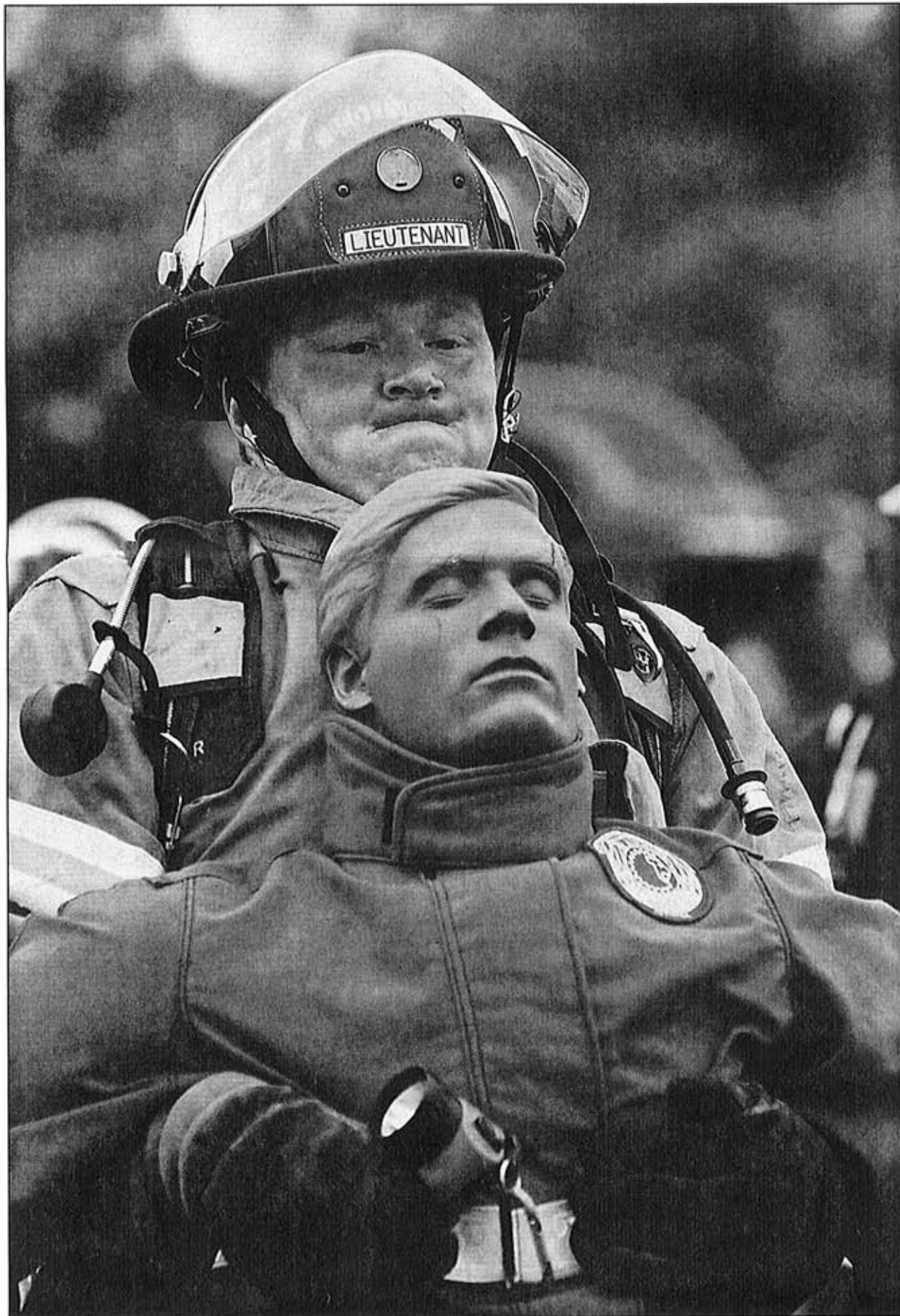


Strength, agility tested in regional competition

Firefighters get physical

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Amid the chattering of curious onlookers and cheers from bystanders, two firefighters decked out in full gear and air packs climbed a five-story structure with a pack slung over their shoulders.

In a race against time, the firefighters and team members hoisted a firehose up the five stories and then raced down the stairs to hammer on a sled.

From there, they weaved in and out of fire hydrants, pulled a charged hose down a track to spray a plastic target and dragged a 175-pound dummy to the finish line — all in less than three minutes.

Friday wasn't an average day on the job for 17 teams of firefighters from across the United States and Canada.

But the events Friday kicking off the Nextel Firefighter Combat Challenge are simulated activities firefighters could be called upon to do any day: climbing, hoisting, chopping, dragging hoses and rescuing victims.

"(Firefighting) is a job that requires us to maintain our physical health," said Evansville firefighter Eric Jamison. "Competitions like this show the public the type of tasks and physical nature of the tasks we have to perform on the job."

The Evansville event is a regional competition. Winners will move on to the annual competition finale: November's World Challenge XIII in Las Vegas.

Jamison and fellow Evansville firefighters Mike Connelly, Ben Morris, Ed Gunn and Dan Brown represented the Evansville Fire Department at the competition, held in the Casino Aztar parking lot.

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Scott Township Fire Fighter Mike Ward drags a 175-pound dummy in the final leg of the team relay of the Firefighter Combat Challenge on Friday afternoon in the parking lot by Casino Aztar. Teams performed different tasks during the relay, including racing up a fire tower carrying equipment and hitting a target with spray from a hose. This is a regional competition with teams from the United States and Canada. The event continues today at 11 a.m. and is free to the public. Parking is available in American General's parking lot.

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Their team, nicknamed Team Axiom, competed against 16 teams of firefighters from as far away as Windsor, Ontario, Canada, and Edwards Air Force Base in California's Mojave Desert.

Jamison said the Evansville Fire Department has had a team compete in the Firefighter Combat Challenge for eight years, although this marks the first year the challenge has been held in Evansville.

Volunteer firefighter Jeremy Sylvester said his team practiced and trained together about three hours a week.

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"(The competition) is something fun for our firefighters to do," Jamison said.

"It challenges us as individuals and motivates us to stay in shape, and it

also challenges us to work together as a team."

Firefighter Brian Moix competed with co-workers Mike Winter, Todd Thorn, John Skinner and Danny Collins on team Gotta Love It from Conway, Ark.

Moix said he enjoys the atmosphere at each competition because, although the firefighters compete against each other for a better time, there is a ca-



Evansville Fire Fighter Ben Pfeffer sprays a target after running down the course with the hose

Friday during the first day of the Nextel Firefighter Combat Challenge.

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maraderie among the competitors.

"Everywhere you go, you meet someone new," Moix said. "The competitors motivate each other and encourage each other, even if they're on different teams. It's just part of that brotherhood between firefighters."

Volunteer firefighters Jere-

my Sylvester, Dave Edmondson, Kevin Jones, David Reddick, Mike Ward and Keith Kahre with the Scott Township Fire Department of Evansville entered as well.

Sylvester said his team practiced and trained together about three hours a week for the event. Individually, each member trained about six days

a week, starting in January.

"We started a physical fitness initiative at the station, and this was a way to get more people involved," Sylvester said. "It was also a way to bring more guys into the station and give them the opportunity to travel (to competitions)."

Sylvester said he was surprised at the amount of physical

effort the competitions require.

"Because this is our first year, we weren't really sure what to expect," he said. "We were basing a lot of our training off videos (provided by On Target, the organization that sponsors the Firefighter Combat Challenge). The actual competition is different from the training, and there's nothing like actually doing it."

Firefighter Byron McDonald and co-workers Zach Ryer, Joey Dickins and Chris Luttrell of the Owensboro, Ky., Fire Department also competed for the first time this year.

McDonald said his team often watched the Firefighter Challenge on ESPN, but never really considered competing until Ryer suggested the idea.

McDonald said he was pleased with his team's performance and enjoys competing, if only for the reason it improves their teamwork skills and physical condition.

"Not only do you make a lot of friends in the fire service out here, but you also learn how much you can push yourself," he said. "The better shape you are in, the better you will be able to do your job, and that makes a big difference."

The Nextel Firefighter Combat Challenge continues today with individual competitions.

Results will be posted on the Firefighter Combat Challenge Web site, www.firefighter-challenge.com.