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Firefighters show competitive side

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By **JACQUELYN WEINER**

Special to The Sun

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When Gainesville firefighter Drew Halvorson geared up Saturday, it wasn't about saving lives. It was about competition.

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The Gainesville Sun

Gainesville Fire Rescue's Drew Halvorson carries a 175-pound "victim" at the fourth annual Firefighter Combat Challenge at The Oaks Mall on Saturday.

"I love the energy," he said. "It gets me pumped up."

Halvorson, 27, was among the 125 firefighters who competed in the fourth annual Southeast Regional Firefighter Combat Challenge in The Oaks Mall parking lot Saturday. The event continues today, starting at 9 a.m.

Firefighters came from all over Florida and several other states to take their best shot at an obstacle course designed to simulate the physically demanding tasks firefighters take on daily.

The participants, wearing 31 pounds of bunker gear and a 19-pound breathing apparatus, must first climb a five-story tower carrying a 42-pound high-rise hose pack.

After reaching the top, the firefighter hoists up a 42-pound hose roll.

Next, the firefighter hurries down the 63 steps and simulates chopping by swinging a 9-pound mallet at a 160-pound steel beam until it moves 5 feet.

The competitor then navigates a series of hydrant-sized obstacles and blasts water at a target.

Finally, the firefighter drags "Rescue Randy," a 175-pound life-sized dummy, 106 feet to the finish line.

Although these tasks may seem daunting, firefighters face similar challenges on a daily basis, Halvorson said.

"It's very realistic," he said. "Just about everything we do . . . relates to real firefighting."

And it's not just about skills; it's about staying in peak physical condition, said Gene Prince, 49, deputy fire chief for Gainesville Fire Rescue.

"Fitness is a big part of what we do," Prince said. "It enables us to withstand the rigors of the job."

The strength and speed of the firefighters was apparent to spectators, such as Linda Wiggins, 50, of Stuart.

"The stamina these guys have...it's amazing," she said.

Saturday's competition marked the individual relays portion of the challenge. The tandem portion of the competition will be held today, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., in the parking lot of The Oaks Mall near Macy's.

The event cost about \$20,000 to put on, said Alex Alston, event manager with the Gainesville Sports Commission.

The Gainesville Sports Commission, GFR and sponsors combine to pay for the competition, he said.

Alston said 300 to 500 spectators are expected to attend the competition over the course of the weekend.

The winner of Saturday's event was Brandon Cunningham of Fort Gordon, Ga., said Paul O. Davis, president to the Firefighter Combat Challenge. Cunningham cruised through the course in 1 minute

and 24 seconds.

Gainesville firefighters' average performance time is usually 2 minutes, said Laura Koppel, spokeswoman for Gainesville Fire Rescue.

Although Gainesville Fire Rescue didn't take top honors Saturday, one Gainesville firefighter's performance stood out, Davis said.

Pat Hartley, who has competed in the challenge for 16 years, took third in the "over 50" category. "He's our iron man," Prince said.

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