

Labor of love for 'Toughest Firefighter'

By Andy Holtmann

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Ask Donovan Hansen what it feels like to be hailed as the "World's Toughest Firefighter" and he will smile shyly and say in a quiet voice that he is honored and proud.

Ask him what it feel like to be a firefighter and his face brightens. He could talk for hours.

"I love my job," he said. "We firefighters have such a close-knit relationship with each other that it is like one big family."

Hansen's love of his job just might have been what earned him the title of World's Toughest Firefighter two years in a row.

The 27-year-old took part in the competitions for the title that were held in Las Vegas last month. The competitions were time-based races in which the contestants had to run relays or practice drills. Hansen pulled in a time of 693 total seconds for the four events.

"What really helped me to win was the stair climb event," he said. "It took me three minutes and one second to climb the stairs at Fitzgeralds Hotel."

He had to make that climb with 25 pounds of equipment. His time was nearly 20 seconds faster than the second-place finisher.

Las Vegas was one of about 25 cities represented by firefighters at the competition.



Donovan Hansen

The Las Vegas team that included Hansen also took first place.

When he is not competing against other firefighters or training for the next event, Hansen is busy at work for Station No. 52 in North Las Vegas preparing for the next emergency.

Hansen has earned a bachelor's degree in business and two associate's degrees in fire science. He worked for the federal Bureau of Land Management battling brush and forest fires and has also worked for the ski patrol. He was hired by the North Las Vegas Fire Department in 1994.

It was then that he heard about the World's Toughest Firefighter competition.

"I saw the games on TV one day and thought that it was cool and that I wanted to try it," Hansen said. "The games for 1994 had passed already and I couldn't attend in 1995 because I was still in rookie school."

In 1996, though, Hansen made his mark in his first appearance by winning the entire event. His repeat this year proved that he is no fluke.

"I train for it all year round," he said. "I go to the gym after work a lot and every now and then I will go to a Strip hotel and just run the staircases up and down."

Hansen also takes part in an annual competition called the Combat Firefighter Challenge. This year's event is set for Sept. 6 in Salt Lake City.

He can cite many examples as to how his job is special and why it is important to him.

"When I was a kid, my family lost a house to a fire," he said. "I guess ever since then I have wanted to help people so they don't have to suffer."

An uncle who lived in Phoenix also inspired him to be a firefighter. He was in the fire service there and always encouraged Hansen to do his best at whatever he wanted.

He can also cite moments that have made his job worth every ounce of energy that he spends.

"We were called out to a house fire on Christmas Eve one year," he said. "As we were putting out the fire, a little boy came up to me and asked about his presents. We were able to save them and I told him that they were OK and that I had talked to Santa inside. His face lit up like I have never seen a face light up before."

Hansen also told of another incident in which they had to revive a woman who suffered a heart attack in a local casino on her birthday. They were able to save her and give her a "second birthday," as Hansen called it.

"There is a misconception by people who think that firefighters sit around all day long and wait for a call," Hansen said.

If they are not on a call, then they spend their time doing team drills, attending seminars, doing paperwork, servicing their equipment, running fire drills, testing hydrants and performing community service.

"I wouldn't give this up for the world," Hansen said. "We have a lot of great guys in the department who are motivated and the self-esteem runs very high."

Married in March of this year, he and his wife, Lori, live in the northwest valley. He said he won't quit his job until they force him into retirement.

"After that, I guess I'll get a cabin up on Lake Tahoe and fish all day long," he said.