

Chula Vista firefighter Jeremy Czapinski shows his mental toughness in his work and competition

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CHULA VISTA – A divorced mother with three children, Jeanie Czapinski paid the bills managing a Bay Area hospital's burn unit. Consequently, the kids were consistently exposed to firefighters.

There were fund-raising events, chili cookoffs, burn-prevention fairs.

“Every 5-year-old boy wants to be a firefighter or an astronaut,” said Jeremy Czapinski, Jeanie's oldest son. “I wasn't smart enough to be an astronaut, so by default I ended up a fireman.”

A Cal Poly graduate with a degree in business, Jeremy is 27 now. He's been a firefighter for four years, the past 3½ with the Chula Vista Fire Department. (His younger brother, Neil, 25, lives in Santee and works for the California Department of Forestry.)



Union-Tribune photo

As part of his workout for the Combat Firefighter Challenge, Jeremy Czapinski flips a tractor-sized tire five times.

Jeremy played four years of college soccer, no doubt intimidating forwards with his 6-foot-4 frame. Now a sculpted 215 pounds with 7½ percent body fat, Czapinski still chases athletic pursuits.

He runs, cycles, dabbles in triathlon, but his passion revolves around the Combat Firefighter Challenge world championship, an annual event that attracts more than 1,000 competitors in numerous divisions.

Wearing full fire-protection gear and breathing via an oxygen tank and mask, firefighters complete a series of job-simulated tasks that take the top athletes about 90 seconds.

Last month in Henderson, Nev., Czapinski finished fourth out of 382 in the World Challenge's open division. It's the third time he's placed in the top 10.

“Jeremy is the most mentally tough person I've ever worked with, by far,” said Vince Gabriele, a personal trainer at Fitness Quest who regularly trains the Chargers' Quentin Jammer and Donnie Edwards. “His mental toughness and pain threshold is like nothing I've ever seen.”

Competing solely against the clock at the World Challenge, firefighters start by racing to the top of a five-story tower carrying a 42-pound hose. Atop the tower they simulate hoisting equipment by pulling up a 50-pound weight attached to rope.

Then they run back to the ground and use a 9-pound mallet to drive a 160-pound steel beam five feet. Next, they zig-zag through a line of fire hydrants to the fourth station, picking up a hose and dragging it 75 feet to spray a target.

Fighting lactic acid by now, the competitors finish the obstacle course by dragging a life-sized 175-pound dummy 100 feet.

Czapinski (pronounced Cha-pin-ski) posted the fastest qualifying time at last month's World Challenge, 1 minute, 27.01 seconds. In the finals, where qualifiers got only one run, Czapinski placed fourth in 1:30.9, 1.78 seconds behind the winner...

Earlier in the year Czapinski competed in a 70-story stair climb. While the stair climb took 16½ minutes, Czapinski rates the World Challenge more difficult.

“For that short period of time you're taxing yourself so hard you can't walk afterward,” he said. “You literally collapse.”

Czapinski's zeal for fitness is an obvious on-the-job benefit. But the reasons for his dedication extend deeper.

On June 23, 2004, Czapinski's father died of a heart attack. Robert Czapinski was 54.

“I'd like to postpone all those negative things that could be in the gene pool,” Czapinski said. “I really value my health and I'd like to be around a long time.”

A special workout

Three weeks before the Combat Firefighter Challenge world championship, trainer Vincent Gabriele devised a workout for Jeremy Czapinski similar to the championship obstacle course.

The workout took about two minutes, 30 seconds longer than Czapinski typically required to complete the world championship course.

“We wanted to eliminate fatigue being a limiting factor,” Gabriele said.

Czapinski would do three circuits of Gabriele's routine with five minutes' rest between each one.

The workout: Run up a flight of stairs to a treadmill that was moving at a 5-minute-per-mile pace and set at a 10 percent incline. Run 25 seconds on the treadmill. Run down the stairs and weave through a set of cones.

Next, squatting and using both hands, flip a tractor-sized tire five times. Then Czapinski dragged a 40-pound sled, plus two 70-pound dumbbells, 30 yards. Wrapping up the workout, Czapinski ran back 30 yards carrying the dumbbells.

– *DON NORCROSS*

There's a distinct camaraderie among the firefighters at the World Challenge. They raucously cheer for one another and trade training tips, to a point.

“They don't tell you everything,” said Czapinski, who is the relatively quiet type, letting his actions reveal his character. “As much as you want everyone to succeed, you don't want your competitors one-upping you.”

Get firefighters together and inevitably they'll start trading on-the-job tales. Czapinski, too, has streaming mental video worth rewinding.

Like kicking down the door at a home near the Chula Vista fire station and saving the life of a woman who was having difficulty breathing.

Like more than once rescuing a man in his 50s who was experiencing chest pain and thinking, “This guy could be the spitting image of my father.”

Like six weeks into his Chula Vista job, then a probationary firefighter, responding to the Cedar fire and battling the blaze for eight straight days.

Said Bob Pfohl, the recently retired Santee fire chief who often trains with Czapinski and worked with him on the ground during the Cedar fire, “The first time I see Jeremy he's performing under the most extreme conditions. He worked nonstop, hours on end to protect our city. His dedication, his work ethic is just ... you don't see it in young people that much.”

About what draws him to the job, Czapinski said, “It's the satisfaction. Whether it's being called to someone who's sick and just holding their hand or administering CPR and saving a life, you make an impact every day.”

As for the Combat Firefighter Challenge world championship, Czapinski plans to keep returning, hoping to dent the top three, each of whom earn rings.

Last month in Nevada, Jeanie Czapinski offered to buy her son a similar ring. He passed.

“I can't imagine trying to wear a ring (that was bought),” Czapinski said. “If you just buy it, it doesn't have the same meaning.”

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