

WOMEN Lead Attack

Story and Photos
By Pamela Jones

at Toughest Two
Minutes in Sports



At the World Combat Challenge, wearing all 75 lbs. of full bunker gear, firefighters from across the U.S. and Canada do what they do in a day's work, but as fast as they can. The race consists of running up five flights of stairs carrying a 45-lb. hose bundle, then hauling another 45-lb. hose pack 75 ft. The next move is running back down to hit a sled five feet with a sledge hammer, running the 140-ft. serpentine to grab a hose full of water, dragging it 75 ft. and then hitting the bulls eye with hose spray. The final step is hauling a 175-lb. dummy backwards to the finish line. There the exhausted firefighter/athlete teeters to the waiting paramedics who pull off the gear and check to make sure they don't need to call an ambulance. It's that hard.

The Firefighter Combat Challenge (FFCC) is held at 25 locations yearly. The World Firefighter Combat Challenge finals will be seen by over 30 million people worldwide on ESPN2, Dec. 22 at 2:00 p.m., and the program will be repeated.

It's "the toughest two minutes in sports," according to ESPN, and our home team firefighters are in the all-star lineup.

After six months, logging 10 to 12 hours a week in combat challenge skill training and an additional six hours in general conditioning, a four-member team from the Colorado Springs Fire Department (CSFD) qualified for the World Combat Challenge, to be held Nov. 2 in Deerfield Beach, Fla.

Aside from the feat itself, the most remarkable aspect of our team is that the men are the novices and the women are the experts.

The CSFD team consists of two female firefighters, Juliet Draper (nicknamed Coach, of course), 39-year-old Stacy Billapando (known as the Viking Princess), 50-year-old Denny Peffer (dubbed Ironman), and Battalion Chief Richard C. Smith, Jr. (nicknamed The Fatman).

Coach Draper introduced the CSFD to the Combat Challenge in 1999 when she won first place in the World competition. Billapando won third place in the 2001 FFCC. Billapando has done the course

faster than any woman so far this year, a title she plans to maintain.

Draper is the poster child of fitness. She has been a firefighter for 11 years and with the CSFD for five years. While a firefighter in the US Army she won a series of competitions: twice the Iron Horse competition for the strongest woman on Fort Carson and the 1994 National Physique Committee All Armed Forces Bodybuilding Championship. After a grueling year in paramedic school, she decided to take this year off and coach her colleagues.

Billapando is nicknamed the Viking Princess because of her blonde hair, blue eyes and soft-spoken demeanor which contrasts with her size, 5'11", 190 lbs., and the warrior-like aggression she takes into training and competition. A mother of two sons, she is also the nurturer of the team, checking to make sure everyone else is doing well emotionally and physically.

Smith, The Fatman, is the largest competitor of the FFCC at 6', 285 lbs.

"I've always been, by every insurance scale and general measure, overweight. I

was bigger as a child. Right now I'm overweight and I'm sure it prevents me from being as fit as I could be. But I took the Candidate Physical Aptitude Test, which is the fire department entry-level test, and I passed it. A lot of thin guys can't do that. A lot of young guys can't do this," says Chief Smith.

Fifty-year-old Peffer is nicknamed Ironman because he is the most well-rounded athlete, along with Draper, on the CSFD. Peffer has competed in the Leadville 100-mile ultra-marathon and the Pikes Peak Marathon, always finishing in the top five percent.

"He is really, really strong and has elite-level aerobic condition, and he can still squat 405 lbs." Draper says with the pride of a dedicated coach.

To appreciate how exceptional this team and the CSFD is, you must consider that nationally only two percent of professional firefighters are female. Colorado Springs, not known for being on the cutting edge, takes a progressive approach to

women in the fire service. Compare New York City where women account for just 28 of 11,400 firefighters (less than 0.3 percent) to Colorado Springs where women make up six percent of the department. In addition, two of these women are the WCC champions, putting them in the top one percent of firefighter fitness, male and female combined. Colorado Springs is the only fire department in the US that can make such a claim.

It's laudable that these women are given the support they need to thrive in leadership positions in a male-dominated profession and a male-dominated sport. The men involved have to accept them and the women have to take charge, which is exactly what's happened with the FFCC.

"These two women have brought a lot to the fire department and they just let others be who they are, they didn't come in trying to change everyone and everything to their liking. Many people get unhappy when they find a situation is not what they thought it was going to be. And that it is

not going to change into what you want it to be. Then they say 'this could be great if it was like this and that.' Billapando and Draper came on and said 'this is how it is, I can be happy here.'" That's how Chief Smith, The Fatman, sees their success.

Before joining the CSFD, Billapando was the first woman to work in refrigeration for King Soopers. The transition from refrigeration to the fire service was not too big. Billapando experienced no difficulties related to gender discrimination, however there were some things inside herself that she had to work through.

"Being allowed to punch through walls and make messes and things like that was little hard for me, because growing up I was always told be nice, don't make messes because young women don't do that. So when I got into a profession where it was alright to make messes, I had to break through that," says Billapando.

Also, Billapando's concern for putting people at ease created some friction in her first year. Billapando explains, "I did get in trouble my first year because I'm a touch person. When I talk to people I would grab their hand or touch their shoulder. I was pulled aside and told I was not allowed to do that. So I had to break that habit."

Being the mother of two sons with a husband is part of Billapando's success.

"Men hitting each other or talking down to each other is just the way they bond," Billapando knows. "Women are different—I would never hit you 'cause I care for you.... it's like being with your brothers,

CSFD Firefighters To Be Featured In Outside Magazine.

Outside Magazine, a national outdoor fitness magazine, will honor Juliet Draper and the CSFD team in its November issue. The article is written by *Westword* journalist and author of *People who Sweat*, Robin Chotzinoff, and the photographs will be taken by internationally renowned photographer Mary Ellen Mark.

Gertrude's restaurant is holding a benefit wine tasting for the Pikes Peak Police and Fire Athletics on Oct. 21. All proceeds will go to help defray the athletes' expenses for participating in the FFCC, for reservations call 471-0887.

all the body noises and games, and the things that boys do."

Men intimidate neither Billapando nor Draper. In some cases it may be the other way around because of their capabilities.

"I used to think that men were better, that they would always be stronger and faster, but that's not true. In an equal situation your average man is going to be stronger than your average woman, but with equal size and body fat percentage the curve will not be as dramatic. Women have to step up and stop making excuses," Draper admits. Proof of this theory is that Billapando finished the combat challenge in 2:41, Peffer in 2:31 and Smith in 4:05.

"They are respected for what they can do at the tower and with the combat challenge. Because there are a bunch of guys who don't want to do it. Both have physical abilities beyond what many men have and are respected for it," says Peffer.

"If you grow up in that paradigm where the man is stronger, how do you deal with it. There are many men who can train for life and not be able to beat these women," adds Chief Smith.

To explain how comfortable the western firemen are in contrast to their eastern counterparts, Draper credits the history of the region. She believes that the military and the western pioneer influences how men accept women in non-traditional situations at the CSFD.

"In the army women did everything except go into combat, and when they are your boss they are your boss. Women in Colorado worked the land right beside the men. The East coast is much older and steeped in the old school system. They are having a hard time letting go of that."

Fiercely competitive, athletic and innovative, Billapando and Draper use the FFCC to keep themselves at the maximum level of fitness. They have brought honor and prestige to the CSFD and Colorado Springs as a whole. They owe their success to the amazing support given by their superiors, Fire Chief Manuel Navarro, their co-workers, the International Association of Firefighters Local 5, the Fire Protection Association and, of course, by Pikes Peak Police and Fire Athletics (formerly Rocky Mountain Police and Fire Athletics) who raise funds to defray the cost of these events.

See www.firejock.com for photos from the combat challenge. For more information see www.coloradospringswpfg.org. ▲



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