

Rescuers hope skills will never be needed

By GREG OTOLSKI
Business Writer

Steve Morgan has never had to rescue a trapped coal miner during his three years on Webster County Coal Corp.'s Dotiki mine-rescue team, but he keeps training for the day he might.

The Dotiki team, from Clay, Ky., put its rescue skills to the test yesterday in the National Mine Rescue, First Aid and Bench Contest at the Kentucky Fair & Exposition Center.

Sixty teams from throughout the country are competing in the four-day contest, sponsored by the U.S. Department of Labor's Mine Safety and Health Administration. The contest ends tomorrow.

"I think sometimes some guys get mad because we get to travel around to different contests and get paid for it, but I know that what I'm doing might save someone's life one of these days," said Morgan, captain of his team.

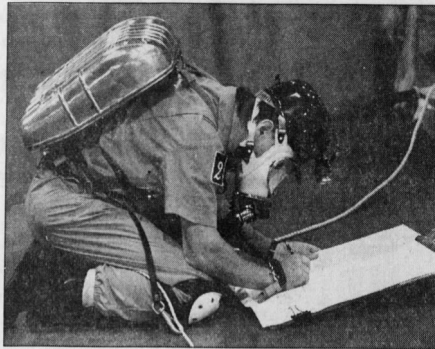
The number of miners killed on the job has dropped from an average of nearly 400 a year during the 1960s to 54 last year. Through yesterday, 27 miners had died so far this year, 11 in Kentucky.

However, some officials of the U.S. Mine Safety and Health Administration are worried that, with the improvement in mine-safety records in recent years as well as tough economic times, mining companies may be disbanding some mine-rescue teams.

Federal law requires only that a company have a rescue team within two hours' travel time of its mines. It's not required that a rescue team be stationed at each mine.

The mine-rescue contest is held every other year. Ninety-one teams competed in 1989 and 80 in 1991. Each rescue team has six members and two alternates. The team members come from all areas within the company — foreman, miner, engineer, shuttle-car operator.

"It can be costly to maintain a team. In addition to the equipment costs, there are training and travel expenses," said Tim Thompson, co-director of the contest.



STAFF PHOTO BY MICHAEL HAYMAN

Dale Exline, who is on the rescue team from Southern Ohio Coal Co.'s Meigs No. 31 mine, drew up a map during yesterday's competition.

"The wise companies are keeping their teams together. They need to think of this as insurance. The number of fatalities has been going down, but that doesn't mean these teams aren't needed anymore."

The importance of mine-rescue teams was never clearer than during the 1989

contest. While teams were competing that year, an explosion at the Pyro mine in Union County, Ky., killed 10 miners.

Mining accidents like the one at Pyro are used as the basis for the rescue situations in the contest. Seven identical mine sites built out of curtains and resembling a maze were created in the East Hall at the fairgrounds. The teams were each given the same problem and had to navigate a series of obstacles to locate and rescue trapped miners.

Yesterday's mock disaster involved an explosion and several fires that left five miners trapped underground. Three miners were killed, and two were injured.

Four judges, who are national mine-safety experts, followed each team as it negotiated water, methane and carbon-monoxide buildups, low levels of oxygen and weak spots in the mine roof. The judges checked to see if the rescuers followed safety regulations. The teams were also judged on how fast they completed the rescue.

"The first job is to make sure that the rescue team stays safe so we can do our job," Morgan said. "The next priority is recovering the survivors."

It took the Dotiki team 72 minutes to locate the two survivors and bring them to safety.

"I wish we could have done a little bit better on our time, but I know that we did our job in a safe manner and we accomplished our task," Morgan said. "We have to feel good about that."

U.S. COAL MINING DEATHS, INJURIES

YEAR	NUMBER OF WORKERS	NUMBER OF DEATHS	DAYS LOST TO INJURY
1980	242,148	133	18,689
1981	238,557	153	15,485
1982	230,027	122	14,215
1983	188,985	70	9,545
1984	187,597	125	10,244
1985	186,853	68	9,073
1986	165,987	89	9,404
1987	163,885	63	12,335
1988	157,179	53	12,435
1989	155,329	68	11,972
1990	159,777	66	12,226
1991	150,107	61	11,292
1992	143,659	54	9,256

Source: Mine Safety and Health Administration

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