

New Life for Life-Saving

Biennial mine rescue competition will be resumed this year as U.S. overrules opposition from leaders of coal industry

By WARD SINCLAIR

Courier-Journal & Times Staff Writer

WASHINGTON — Overriding opposition from the coal industry, the U.S. Bureau of Mines has decided to revive its traditional biennial coal-mine rescue and first-aid contest for miners this year.

An announcement is expected soon from the bureau, designating the Kentucky Fair And Exposition Center at Louisville as the site of this year's contest Oct. 4 and 5.

Ordinarily, such an announcement would get little attention in the press, for mine-rescue and first-aid contests have been sponsored routinely every two years over several decades by the bureau—without controversy.

The contest, an event that generates enthusiasm among coal miners entered as teams, was last held in 1967.

But in 1969, on the heels of the Farmington, W. Va., disaster that killed

78 men and as the Congress debated mine-safety law reforms, coal industry officials pressured the bureau into canceling the contest that year.

"The bituminous Coal Operators Association and others in the industry indicated then that they were reluctant to call attention to this kind of activity," a bureau official commented yesterday.

The bureau raised the subject again this year, reminding industry and United Mine Workers (UMW) officials that 1971 would be an appropriate time—an odd-numbered year—to resume the competition.

But the industry, again apparently reluctant to call more public attention to a mine-safety fatality record that has steadily deteriorated since 1969, objected.

A high-level bureau official reported yesterday that the decision to override

the industry point of view was reached during another bureau-union-industry meeting this week.

According to this source, industry trade association representative Robert Vines of Washington objected to the proposals to revive the contest. Vines could not be reached for comment yesterday.

Vines reportedly was holding out for a resumption of the competition in 1972. A motion to hold the contest this year was made by UMW safety director Lewis Evans, who was said to have become angered when Vines declined to go along with his motion.

Donald Schlick, assistant bureau director for coal mine health and safety, was said to have then made the final decision to proceed with the contest, with tentative agreement in the bureau that it will be held in Louisville.

The bureau, the industry and the union all have come in for their share of criticism for unsafe conditions in the mines, particularly since passage of the 1969 federal Coal Mine Health and Safety Act.

Fatalities in 1970 increased by 25 per cent over the 1969 total, with the Dec. 30 tragedy that took 38 lives in a mine near Hyden, Ky., raising the toll to 255.

Bureau statistics for the first quarter of 1971 show that production continued to increase, and fatalities ran ahead of the pace set in the first quarter of last year.

Bureau officials expect about 1,000 persons to take part in the 1971 rescue and first aid contest at Louisville, where teams of miners will be run through a series of competitive examinations to test their speed and proficiency.

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Over coal-industry protest

U.S. to resume mine-rescue contest

By WARD SINCLAIR

Courier-Journal & Times Staff Writer

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Oct 21, 2025

Mine rescue contest

Life savers take tests seriously

By LARRY WERNER
Courier-Journal Staff Writer

Wearing self-contained life-support units on their backs, lamps on their helmets and carrying a stretcher and other life-saving gear for any miners who may have survived the disaster, a crew of five rescuers marched single-file into the smoky mine entrance in the east wing of the Kentucky Fair and Exposition Center.

That's right, a "mine" in Louisville's fairgrounds convention facility—where 19 mine rescue teams were competing in the U.S. Bureau of Mines biennial coal-mine rescue and first-aid contest. The winners will be announced today at the end of the two-day event.

Yesterday, the east wing was filled with coverall-clad mine workers from five states who have trained as rescue workers and were now testing their skills in competition.

The air was given a hazy, mine-like atmosphere by the continuous detonation of smoke bombs to simulate one of the chief obstacles that face mine-rescue workers—poor visibility.

Pipe frames were arranged in mazes through which the rescue teams moved on their make-believe life-saving mission.

And after Bernie Magerko and his team checked their equipment, they were dispatched by U.S. Bureau of Mines judges into one of the many simulated mines in the exhibition hall.

For Magerko and his fellow rescue-

team members from the Maple Creek mine at Uniontown, Pa., this was the first time they would test their rescue training in competition.

The team was given a written "problem," which described the disaster. In this case, an explosion had caved in parts of the mine, filled some sections with carbon monoxide and left smoldering fires which would further endanger miners surviving the explosion as well as the rescuers.

It was the task of Bernie Magerko's team to check the mine for bodies—which would be marked—and to bring out any survivors, while mapping the location of anything found along the way.

As the team members started into the first mine opening they found a dinner bucket. The bucket was checked by one member of the team.

Men sometimes leave notes in their dinner buckets for their families, one of the judges said.

After the bucket was checked and mapped, the team proceeded through the tunnel—linked together by a combination lifeline and communication cable. The cable kept the men in contact with another team member stationed outside

the mine, and kept the men from becoming separated in the smoky passages.

The team took quick, but careful, steps through the openings. Magerko raised and lowered a wooden "sounding rod" as if to test the mine ceiling for sturdiness.

At one point, the team had to turn back and take another route when it came upon a sign on the floor that read "hip-deep water." There was another blocked passage indicated by a sign that read "caved."

As the team moved along, they found five dummies representing bodies of dead miners. Behind partitions were two live miners who were the survivors.

After an hour and 16 minutes of tedious exploration of the mine, dozens of honks from the bicycle horn Magerko used to give forward, retreat and stop orders, and continuous checks with instruments for poisonous gases in the air, Magerko's team emerged from the make-believe mine with the two survivors.

Spectators greeted Magerko and his team with cheers, and the Maple Creek mine machine-operator removed the mask from his sweaty face and the oxygen tanks from his back.

"I thought we did real well for the first

time," Magerko puffed. "Boy, when they throw that smoke at you, that makes it tough."

Magerko said such contests "give you all kinds of experience." And he said there are other benefits to a national mine-rescue contest.

"It makes for competition, and you get to know fellows from other districts," he said. "If there ever is a disaster, they'll call guys from all over."

Magerko had to take his team out of the mine temporarily before he had rescued the second survivor.

"One of my men was low on air," Magerko said. "When there's something wrong with one man, we all come out; we don't leave one or two in there."

William Craft, a Bureau of Mines official from Madisonville, said the rescue teams take the competition seriously, even though it appears a little silly to observers who cannot quite picture a pipe-frame maze as mine tunnels and neatly-lettered signs as physical obstructions in the passages.

Craft said the 19 teams came to Louisville from all parts of Kentucky as well as from West Virginia, Pennsylvania, Illinois and Virginia.



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