

Mine rescue contest simulates disasters

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (AP) — People who lugged thousands of dollars of equipment from a dozen states are competing for national prominence with skills they hope never to have to use.

For some, the National Mine Rescue and First Aid Contest is merely a simulation, the chance to exercise judgment within the coal industry's rules and regulations.

For others, such as the Emery Mining Corp. team from Huntington, Utah, the tests might be a reminder of real mining disasters, such as the Wilberg mine fire that killed 27 people in December.

"This shows a lot of situations we could come up against," said John Parris, who works for the Jewell Smokeless Coal Corp. of Vansant, Va.

About 100 teams are competing in the U.S. Mine Safety and Health Administration's 30th biennial contest, which has been conducted in Louisville since 1965.

Teams of mine rescuers, who have other regular mining jobs, take written exams and are sequestered until called to tackle a mine-rescue problem.

The mine tunnels are cordoned paths on a concrete floor, the loose rock merely pieces of paper taped down and barricades just sheets of yellow plastic hung like shower curtains. But the miners were attired in oxygen masks and operating the same gear they would use if their co-workers were trapped beneath the surface.

Each team designates a worker who stays outside the simulated mine and maps the path, keeping in touch by phone. The others — a lead man, a gas tester, stretcher carriers and another map man — venture into the mine, after testing their equipment and hearing sketchy details as outlined in the problem.

There are numerous judges, most from the MSHA, who watch for infractions of procedures, errors of judgment, problems in mapmaking, and misuse of equipment. And there's always another judge — the clock.

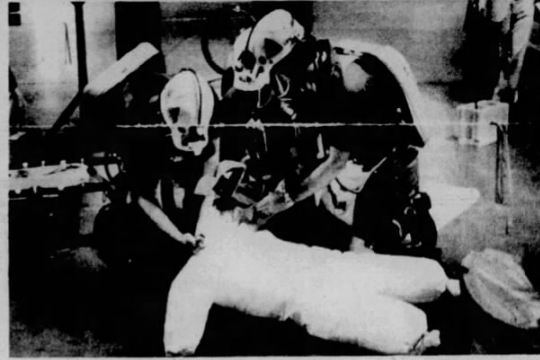
"Every second counts — when it's ticking, you're under pressure," said Mac Ruble, captain of the Jewell team.

His team finished its test in 54 minutes. Some teams took nearly two hours. But speed is not everything in mine rescues.

"The rule in mine rescue is that you proceed cautiously; you never hurry," said John Shutack, MSHA district manager in Wilkes-Barre, Pa.

"Ninety-nine percent is just common sense and good judgment," Shutack said.

Done properly, the mock exercise has members charting the mine from its entrances, removing dummies representing live miners and leaving in those representing dead miners, testing frequently for gases, dealing with fire, building some barricades, adjusting ventilation and testing the cave roof.



(AP Laserphoto)

A MINE Rescue team from Itmann Coal Co. of Itmann, W.Va., attends to a dummy victim of a simulated mine accident during Wednesday's preliminary round of the National Mine Rescue and First Aid Contest in Louisville. Teams from 12 states are competing in the biennial event.

The Monterey Coal Co. team from Albers, Ill., practiced all last week for its first shot at the national competition. The competitive experience will help if they ever have to deal with an actual mine disaster, they said.

"We hope we don't have to," Andy Mandich said.

The tests are fun and challenging, the competitors say, but the offshoots of the contests are better trained, better coordinated rescuers.

To get to the national competition, the teams must win local and district contests, said Herschel Potter, chief of the MSHA safety division.

The federal agency has found

over the years that people who train for the rescue work are also safer employees, said Potter, who is also a former West Virginia mine rescue team member.

The mine rescue tests conducted Wednesday and today were to reduce the competitors to 20 by Friday. Other competitions were conducted in equipment repair and first aid.

First-aid teams were given five injury problems to solve in a limited time period. One member of each team became the patient and the others scurried about tying bandages, attaching splints, performing artificial respiration and loading on stretchers.

1985 National Mine Rescue Contest

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