

'There can be only one'

sub: Battle of the elements at the annual waterfight

By Neal Ross

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From one perspective, it's a fierce struggle pitting broad-shouldered humanity against the inexorable laws of physics: where raw muscle, lightning reflexes, and the relentless, primal dominance-urge collide in a raging impact of strength against strength, force against force, colleague against colleague.

Looked at in another way, it's just a bunch of people trying to push an empty beer keg past each other by squirting water at it.

And as with most sports, the truth about [Sunday's] Sonoma Valley Firefighters' Waterfight lies somewhere in between.

"It's one of those crazy events where everybody's having a good time," says Richard Gulson, safety officer with the Kenwood fire department, who also generally acts as the contest's master of ceremonies.

But Gulson adds that the sport's essence – three people on a hose, moving purposefully as one – is also the sine qua non of firefighting.

"This is something that has to be done on the fire ground ... these are the tools of the trade," he says. "It uses real world technique and real world tools, but it still is a game." Each September, teams from the Valley's seven fire departments – Kenwood, Glen Ellen, Mayacamas, Eldridge, Valley of the Moon, Sonoma and Schell-Vista – and the local California Department of Forestry station come together for an afternoon of friendly rivalry and structured fun at the Valley of the Moon Vintage Festival.

Preparations are simple. An overhead cable is strung down the partial length of Spain Street in front of The Barracks. An empty beer keg, brightly painted by last year's winners, is tethered to it with a loop of cable – a necessary precaution to keep the keg from caroming into the crowd and out of play.

The keg then sits patiently in a mid-street circle, equidistant from two goal lines some 50 feet apart. The two opposing teams – each comprising six firefighters manning two hoses – face off on either side of the keg. Hearty cheers erupt from the crowd, mingling with light-hearted jeers from the combatants, and the waterfight gets under way.

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Knowing the waterfight begins with knowing its terms. A "down" is a point awarded to one team knocking the keg across the opposing goal line, or when the opposing team is charged with two fouls; a "foul" occurs when keg or tether contacts a firefighter or part thereof, or if someone loses his or her footing, or if a team isn't ready for a new game within a minute of the previous bout; and a "hinder" results from spectator intervention or equipment malfunction.

The game's rules (last updated in 1998) explain the combat in eloquent simplicity:

"A. All team members must be outfitted in full protective clothing, including turnout jacket and pants (liners must be in place), structural helmet with face shield or goggles, boots, and gloves.

"B. Upon a signal from the referees, all nozzles shall be fully charged and directed to the ground adjacent to the keg.

"C. Upon a whistle from the referee, the teams shall direct their nozzles at the keg until a down is scored, or a foul or hinder is declared by a referee.

“D. Upon a whistle signal from the referee during competition, both teams shall close their nozzles and await the referee’s ruling.

“E. Following the scoring of a down, the keg is returned to the center of the playing area. Teams shall switch sides of the playing area and prepare as in rule (B).

“F. Time shall be kept during play. The time allotted for each down shall be three minutes. If a down is not scored within three minutes ... the team having advanced the keg closest to their opponent’s goal line shall be awarded the down.

“G. Whenever play is stopped, the keg shall be returned to the centerline of the street by the referee at a point perpendicular to the last position of the keg.

“H. The first team to win two downs shall be declared the winner of the game.

“I. All decisions of the referees are indisputable and final.”

Defeated teams drop out as the afternoon grinds on, narrowing the field until only two remain. Last year’s deciding battle involved perennial rivals Glen Ellen and Sonoma, with the latter emerging victorious after at least two “draws” – when the bouncing keg is locked amid four streams of water until one team gives way.

The afternoon sport can be interrupted with business, but Bob Norrbom, Sonoma fire captain and chairman of the waterfight committee, says that’s rare.

“Schell-Vista had an accident (call) in the middle of the waterfights,” he recounts. Although they were still undefeated, the length of the call caused the team to be disqualified.

“I felt bad because their volunteers had to go, but others fought to get where they are,” Norrbom said.

Gulson says there are no definitive rules on work-related interruptions.

“If somebody goes off for a three-hour incident and can’t get back until 5 o’clock, were not going to suspend the game,” he says. “It really depends on the type of incident. If it’s small, we’ll hold their spot – if the hills are burning up, it’s different.”

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Gulson will once again provide “gallon by gallon” commentary from the dry Barracks veranda, as he has off and on for the past 15 years. His job is integral to the proceedings: drawing the crowds over from the rest of the Festival, explaining the game, introducing the teams and each team member by name, and ticking off the rules and lists of equipment.

“If there are any fire buffs in the audience, they like to know what kind of hoses we’re using and water pressure,” he says.

“Having set the stage and introduced the thing \_ then basically my job is to keep track of the teams and the downs,” he says. “I (also) kind of comment, when appropriate, on the cooperation and camaraderie that exists in this Valley between the fire departments.”

“I’m happy to be involved in that, because it does bring the firefighters together for a social event – they thoroughly enjoy kidding each other,” he says, referring to the “lighthearted banter that goes on between the teams, amongst the teams, and some of the informed hangers-on.”

“In England, the term is ‘sledging’ – a cricket term – for the banter that goes on ... to get the batter off his stroke,” he says. “The team members sledge members of the other team, (using) terms designed to slightly denigrate the other teams.”

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The waterfight’s true origins are shrouded in mystery. Local legend holds that the contest grew out of the annual Fireman’s’ Muster, a statewide competition to see who can do

what faster and better than anyone else. But all agree that it was former Sonoma Fire Chief Al Mazza who first imported waterfighting to the Valley.

“I went to work for the City of Sonoma in ‘71, and that year I participated in the waterfights,” said Mark Emery, Glen Ellen’s assistant chief and the waterfight’s referee.

“Al was instrumental in bringing the waterfights to the city from Napa.

“Sonoma used to compete over there with them,” he adds. “Sonoma Fire brought it to the Plaza. They used to do it up between the Mission and the Barracks (on First Street East). In those days, the fight was two teams, but they only had a single nozzle (apiece).”

This made the struggle harder, but no less epic.

“Ray (Mulas, now Schell-Vista assistant chief) was a young firefighter then,” Emery recalls. “We’d get into these standoffs, Ray and I, for minutes on an end. We used to have these long, drawn out battles.”

“I can’t remember the year we went to the four nozzles,” he continues. “The form that it’s in now, that happened in the late 70s ... early 80s. A lot of the strategies changed, the tactics changed.”

What those tactics are, though, Emery refuses to say.

“I’m sworn to secrecy,” he says, laughing. “Every department tries to work on or develop a different (approach) – they’re always checking out the other teams, but I’m not sure there’s any right way or wrong way. It all boils down to hand-eye coordination, a lot of stamina and quick reflexes.”

But Emery did disclose a few basic principles, on the assurance that the greater mysteries would remain unrevealed.

“It seems that teams get into trouble when they get too close to the keg ... you lose control of it, and you need to stay back,” he said. “The people as a team have to move together and work together - everybody can’t be looking at the keg. Another one, of course, is the last person back has to be pulling the hose and moving the hose to keep the kinks out of it.”

Gulson emphasizes that, just as in firefighting, a successful waterfight team is one that moves as a unit.

“The nozzleman gets very intuitive support from the two behind him. If the barrel goes off-line, and the nozzleman has to follow it, really there’s no opportunity for people to shout directions,” he says. “They have to do it instinctively.”

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Just as baseball is more than merely the sum of its strikes, runs and outs, waterfighting also has its nuances and finer points.

“When it looks like the barrel is slightly out of control and it’s being moved down the court ... you can’t just stand your ground and squirt water at it,” Gulson explains. “The team that senses that the barrel is going their way has to aggressively move down the court. That’s fun to see – when the team gets a slight advantage and they just go for it. They’ve got to sense it.”

Sometimes the keg gets knocked offside, safely restrained by its tether but chased by occasionally crowd-wetting streams. Police repeatedly warn curbside spectators of the potential soaking – but many keep their seats, either for a “piece of the action” or simply to cool down.

“If it’s a nice warm day, and the crowd doesn’t mind sort of getting a little bit sprayed, the crowd has fun,” Gulson says. “The kids are having a good time – they probably don’t understand, but they have a good time ... (and the) adults are kids in big bodies.”

But sometimes, skill combines with physics and the keg remains almost motionless between the contending streams – or it rises and falls like a cork, without moving an inch toward either goal line, and nozzlemanship gives way to simple endurance.

“Eventually, what happens is one team gets tired,” Gulson says. “Sometimes the draw is not kind to teams, especially at the end (of the day’s contest).”

Additionally, the game takes a physical toll, since the firefighters are wearing full structure-fire turnouts and running around on an often-hot day.

“You should see the water they drink,” Gulson says. “They can lose a few pounds in an afternoon. Fitness does play a part.”

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Like many aspects of the fire service, the waterfights are a mix of the serious, the playful, and the traditional.

“One of the traditions is, the team that wins this year buys the beer for next year’s fight,” Emery says. “And no, we don’t empty the keg before the fight.”

The current waterfight keg has actually been empty for several years, bearing its annual duty with only a few scars. “We wore one out, though,” Emery says.

Last year’s design, by 1998 winners Valley of the Moon, featured red, orange and yellow flames. The motif changes at the winners’ whim – Emery said the Schell-Vista department once painted the keg to resemble a Holstein cow.

There’s also a “perpetual trophy” inscribed with the names of each year’s winning team, which currently lives in the Sonoma Fire Station. (No word yet on what this year’s Sonoma-engineered keg design will be.)

But whether or not the Sonoma Fire Department will lay consecutive claim to the annual trophy, once again dominating the Valley fire service in terms of footwork, dexterity and endurance, one aspect of the city team’s role is etched in stone:

“The winner buys a keg of beer,” Gulson says, “and we all get together afterwards at the Sonoma fire station.”