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On target! With interested spectators watching closely in back, Caspian-Gaastra firefighters finish their run in the five-man coupling race by hitting the target with the stream from the hose.

CRYSTAL FALLS—If the results of the county firefighters' tournament mean anything, watch out for the Caspian-Gaastra Fire Department at next month's U.P. tournament.

Caspian-Gaastra claimed first place at the county tournament, held here on June 16, winding up with 35 points, ahead of both Crystal Falls (29) and West Iron County (27).

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The departments are starting to get ready for the U.P. Firefighters Tournament, which will take place July 26 to 28 in Ironwood. Preparations are in the very early stages, and the race teams are just getting started.

The theme of this year's U.P. tourney is, "Battling the beast like it's the end of the world," a reference to those Mayan prophecies that, if correct, mean there won't be any 2013 tourney in L'Anse.

The county tourney was scored 10-8-6, with teams losing one point if they are disqualified. That evened itself out—each team got DQ'd once.

Crystal Falls, which hosted the races, also took part and won the first three events (ladder race, hose relay and five-man coupling). Despite getting disqualified in the fourth race (the hose interchange) for a bad coupling, CF led after four events with 29 points, ahead of Caspian-Gaastra's 25 and West Iron's 19.

Those four events are standard at U.P. tournaments. The final event is the mystery race, not announced until after the fourth race is finished.

Not knowing what Ironwood's firemen have up their sleeves next month, Crystal Falls opted for a three-man speed race as the mystery race: Each of the three racers makes two couplings, including the hydrant and nozzle. Caspian-Gaastra had the best time, 47.63 seconds. West Iron was second at 52.05.

Actually, Crystal Falls had the second best time (49.97), and the eight points for second place would have been enough to give them the team title with 37 points.

But since Crystal Falls knew the mystery race in advance, it did not count its score and took no points for that event. That meant Caspian-Gaastra's 35 team points was good for a six-point win.

The county bragging rights were nice, and so was the prize money. But the main value of the tourney is to help everyone prepare for the U.P. tourney.

Joe Sabol, Caspian-Gaastra race captain, said it's been hard to arrange practices because some firefighters are working out of town. At one recent practice, more serious problems—a hose got loose.

"It kind of whipped around a little bit," said Sabol. "It banged up one of our guys real good, one of our main racers—but he feels pretty good today. Things like that happen."

Since Caspian-Gaastra has some younger firefighters who are now eligible to take part in the U.P. tournament (over one year on the department's roster), the future looks promising.

"We did fine," Sabol said. "This is a good little tune-up for us, so we know what we've got to have for the U.P.'s."

Toni Bongi, West Iron race captain, said his team needs work. So far, that hasn't been easy—the WICFD only had one practice before the county tourney. "We have construction workers—they work late. We have Asplundh workers—they work out of town. It's tough to get them all together."

Bongi said he will get everybody together soon. "They can see today—competition is tough. So we're going to have to get together and really bear down." In the countdown to the U.P.; tourney, he said, they will practice twice a week.

"The other teams are very good—they have some young fellows coming up, and that's always trouble to the other departments. They're quick, they dress well.

"Crystal Falls is always tough, and they have some young fellows coming up."

That's also how Dan Graff, Crystal Falls' race captain, saw it. He said he liked how his team did.

"But, to be honest, we didn't practice yet this year." The county tournament was several weeks earlier than normal this year—usually, it's closer to July 1.

"We generally try to get 10 practices in before the U.P.s," Graff said, "and we usually count this [the county tournament] as a practice, too.

"By then, usually the guys are quite polished."

Crystal Falls is also working some younger firefighters onto its race team. "They've all been on the department for a couple years," Graff said. "I was real pleased with their times."

Ladder race: 1. Crystal Falls, 19.29 seconds; 2. West Iron County, 22. (Caspian-Gaastra, DQ , jacket not fastened).

Hose relay: 1. Crystal Falls, 43; 2. Caspian-Gaastra, 44.65; 3. West Iron County, 45.69.

Five-man speed coupling: 1. Crystal Falls, 27.78; 2. Caspian-Gaastra, 34.72; 3. West Iron County, 42.89.

Five-man interchange: 1. Caspian0-Gaastra, 55.82. (Crystal Falls, DQ, bad coupling; West Iron County, DQ, nozzle not on).

Mystery race (three-man speed): 1. Caspian-Gaastra, 47.63; 2. Crystal Falls, 49.97; 3. West Iron County, 52.05.