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## The Express-Times

# Allentown Firedogs, ready to defend relay title, issue challenge to marathon relay teams

Sunday, June 28, 2009

By **JD MALONE**

The Express-Times

ALLENTOWN | For three years, the Via Cup has resided in a display case along with a multitude of athletic swag won by teams of Allentown firefighters.

The Firedogs, who have thwarted Bethlehem firefighters and even a team made up of elected officials, don't have any plans to relocate their trophy, which is awarded during the Lehigh Valley Health Network Marathon for Via.

The cup is a race division for teams that work or volunteer for the same municipality or governmental entity.

Firedogs team leader Lt. James Wehr said competition in the category is light, though new teams -- for the past three years their sole serious opponent has been the Bethlehem Fire Department -- might add new flavor to the race.

Bethlehem's team captain, Mark Reiser, said the Firedogs are in a whole other class than his team is.

"Those guys are like real runners," Reiser said. "We're just casual runners. We try, but we know it's hard."

Wehr likes to hear that his opponents are intimidated even though the race isn't until September.

"If Bethlehem thinks we're serious runners," Wehr said, "then we aren't worried about them at all."

The Firedogs cruised to a Via Cup victory last year in 3:13:22, blowing away the Bethlehem team, L735, by about 18 minutes. The Dashing Dems, featuring Mayor John Callahan and Lehigh County Executive Don Cunningham, limped through a 3:38:49 finish.

Callahan and crew did not return calls seeking comment or express their desire to take on the Firedogs again. Wehr and Reiser hope a few additional teams arise in the coming months. Both departments also hope to field an additional team.

"It'd be nice to see some more teams get in it," Wehr said.

Via spokeswoman Lisa Walkiewicz said the Via Cup could use more competition. The race division is open to police, EMS, fire and other municipal services and elected officials.

Wehr said he was glad the cup category was created because competing against the total field of five-person relay teams was brutal -- the Firedogs finished 24th among all teams last year, more than a half hour off the winning pace.

"We can't compete with them," Wehr said of teams stocked with runners from specialty running stores, cross country teams and Rodale employees.

Reiser said the competition is great, but assisting Via is the real reason he puts together the department's team every year. The proceeds of the marathon benefit Via, which provides services for children and adults

with disabilities.

"We have people from Via that stop at the station," Reiser said, noting that the firefighters enjoy interacting with Via's clients. "So we wanted to help them."

Walkiewicz said the relay races this year will be split into five segments ranging in length from 3.9 to 6.8 miles. The relay races are run on the 26.2-mile marathon course.

She added that the redesigned course, which starts at Lehigh Valley Hospital in Salisbury Township and ends at Easton's Centre Square, eliminated the mile-long hill that flogged runners in the past.

Wehr said he wasn't sure which leg he would run. But since it always corresponded to the dreaded hill in prior years, he is glad it's gone.

"I do the leg that nobody else wants to do," he said. "Getting rid of that hill should help everyone run a little faster."

Though Walkiewicz admits the Via Cup is not as impressive as, say, Lord Stanley's Cup, Reiser already has a spot in mind for it in the Christmas City -- West Broad Street's Memorial Fire Station.

Reporter JD Malone can be reached at 610-867-5000 or by e-mail at [jdmalone@express-times.com](mailto:jdmalone@express-times.com).

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