

New Tampa Firefighter Ready to Defend Arm-Wrestling World Title

Big as a fire truck, decorated firefighter Wayne DeMatthews takes his arm-wrestling prowess to the World Police & Fire Games in New York City.

By Rory Crump August 12, 2011

Comic book superheroes lead double lives. It helps make the myth.

Tampa firefighter Wayne DeMatthews — working from Tampa Fire Rescue Station 21 off Cross Creek Boulevard — saves lives by day and wins world arm-wrestling championships by night.

Eclipsing the sun at 6-foot-4 and 285 pounds, “DeMat” doesn’t need an inflated costume, and he’s not a myth.

He’s a guy you want watching over you.

In 2006, DeMatthews scooped up a paralyzed Tampa man with his tattooed 22-inch arms and escaped a burning house — a well-documented, legendary move in local public-safety circles. TV’s “Investigation Discovery” documented the save, too. Tampa City Council recognized his heroism with a commendation earmarked for extraordinary efforts.

And starting Aug. 26, DeMatthews aims to win a different kind of firefighter award, defending his super-heavyweight arm-wrestling title in the World Police & Fire Games in New York City.

The competition — the firefighter and police Olympiad — has in the past attracted 8,000 athletes from 70 countries. And according to the event’s promoters, the World Police & Fire Games is the second-largest multi-sport event in the world, topped only by the Summer Olympic Games.

But this one is different. It’s big — the biggest.

According to 2011wpfg.org, “the games respectfully coincide with the remembrance of September 11, 2001.”

Remembrance and gratitude are this year's themes, an emotional nod to the police and fire brotherhood fortified by the events of 9/11. The stakes are high, but DeMatthews is ready.

"It's my only world title, and I don't plan on losing it," said DeMatthews, who rose to the top in 2009 in Vancouver. The games are biennial.

Born in Edison, NJ, DeMat's patented "top-roll" move — pulling his opponent in and over— will receive hometown roars. "For me, the tournament is so huge. I'm going back home to New Jersey and then competing in the shadow of Ground Zero. It's going to be overwhelming," DeMatthews said.

Yes, his title and 9/11 are serious motivators. But memories of his younger brother, Joey, pack a heavier punch. Wayne lost his brother during the 2005 Christmas holiday in Port St. Lucie, where both brothers attended high school. Wayne, home for the holidays, was the first responder but was unable to resuscitate his brother.

"After the Christmas of 2005, when he tragically passed away, I found a new respect for life and a reason to compete and be my very best in everything that I do," DeMatthews said.

Joey and Wayne were giant bookends and typical brothers — always outworking and out-hustling each other to be the best. And that kindred spirit is always there. "I know he sees everything I do," DeMatthews said.

A renaissance strongman, DeMatthews has held a long list of arm-wrestling and bodybuilding titles. He's undefeated as both an amateur boxer and mixed martial artist, and is currently in discussions with MMA promoter and FightZone TV personality Jay Adams to re-enter the fighting ranks.

A firefighter's jagged schedule can make room for a second career. DeMatthews, busy training, traveling, and winning, considers his athletic pursuits another occupation.

"You could say it's a second job," DeMatthews said. "I've been training for so long for my various sports endeavors, everything from bodybuilding, arm wrestling, boxing, and MMA, that it's just becoming part of my routine."

DeMatthews is a nine-year veteran of Tampa Fire Rescue, and his peers support his cause in and out of the gym. They like to see him win.

"The guys at the department are great," DeMatthews said. "They get jacked up for my tournaments."

Arm wrestling may still be an underground sport, but it has evolved out of the bars and