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Dennis Brochey watches Travis Barke, 16, a junior at North Tonawanda High School, as he works out at Fitness 19, to prepare for the Red Brick Bench Press Championships. Bill Wippert/Buffalo News

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Club straining to raise funds for military families

Powerlifting event likely to fall far short of last year's totals

By Miguel Rodriguez NIAGARA CORRESPONDENT

LEWISTON — Here's another sign that these are indeed rough economic times

A fundraiser for a good cause likely won't come anywhere near raising the amount of cash it did last year for financially strapped families of military personnel. That's because businesses have been forced to tighten their purse strings during this current economic crisis.

The Red Brick Bench Press Championships will go on as scheduled later this month, but the competition in which weightlifters look to show that they have bigger hearts than biceps will likely fall far short of last year's total. Last winter, the event generated an astounding \$10,100 for the 107th Air Refueling Wing Family Readiness Support Group at the Niagara Falls Air Reserve Station.

This year's event will take place from 9 a. m. to 5 p. m. Feb. 21 in the Red Brick School, 145 N. Fourth St. Organizers expect to attract 90 participants but have braced to bring in far less in donations of money and nonperishable goods.

"The economy is hurting," said Dennis Brochey of the Niagara Powerlifting Club, which organizes the competition. "Two or three people have already told me it's not in their budget this year. . . . Anything they did donate helped, but they didn't even have money in the budget to do that this year. Obviously we're looking for help from anywhere this year."

Brochey and his Niagara Powerlifting Club teammates founded the competition in 2004 as a way of showing their appreciation to the military personnel at the Refueling Wing. The items and cash raised during the event are donated to the 107th Family Support Group, which distributes the aid to the families most in need of financial assistance at a time when their primary breadwinners are working for their country in a war zone.

The bench press championship has raised close to \$30,000 since its inception.

As of Tuesday, Brochey's gang has only been able to attract 11 cash sponsors. Last year at this time, they had secured 60 commitments from the businesses that provided sponsorship dollars in exchange for signage. That included a sponsorship spot on the banner that contains photographs of competitors from the event that the Niagara Powerlifting Club sends to local troops in Iraq, the team's way of reminding the soldiers their sacrifices haven't been forgotten back home.

As of Tuesday, not including the donation money that'll come from the entrants' participation fees — expected to be about \$3,500 total — organizers had secured a total of \$1,290.

While every contribution helps, these lifters have competitive personalities. They raised the bar to a new standard with last year's fundraising efforts. While they figured they'd be hard-pressed to reach the same total this year, they still expected to be further ahead than they are at the moment.

Tom Schmidt is one of Brochey's volunteer supporters who also will compete in the championship. He estimated that donations from individuals are down about 25 percent from last year, while corporate sponsorship is down about 50 percent. "It's been tough this year," said Schmidt, who lives in the Town of Tonawanda. "A lot of the businesses aren't making money, . . . so it's tough to ask them to donate money when they're not making money.

"Even though we did so good last year, you always want to do more. . . . But when you're asking people [for money], even if they gave 50 cents or a dollar you're still ahead of the game. It's more than you had when you started to do this bench meet for the troops. Anything you get will help, from the smallest donation to the largest donation. Anything anybody gives you helps the cause."

The event is open to lifters over the age of 9, and there are eight competitive divisions — including separate ones for police, firefighters and military. Cost is \$40 for those who register by Feb. 14. Those who register after that date will have to pay \$50. The first 15 active military members to register don't have to pay to compete, but after the first 15 the cost is \$15. Audience admission is \$3 for adults and \$1 for youngsters under 13.

Competitor and sponsorship applications are available online at www.niagarapowerliftingclub.com or by calling Brochey at 200-3533. mrodriguez@buffnews.com