

Camaraderie grows among drill sergeant, AIT platoon sergeant competitors

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Staff Sgt. Brandon Laspe, competing for AIT Platoon Sergeant of the Year, works his way through an obstacle course Thursday at Fort Jackson, South Carolina. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. James Seals)

With the heat and humidity soaring at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, on Thursday, the 15 NCOs competing to be named the top drill sergeant and AIT platoon sergeant had to survive on the small pleasures, like running through some cool mud on the obstacle course, or getting five minutes of shade while talking to a journalist.

Besides those moments, it was just one test after another, whether it was running and marching, training new recruits on the Army Physical Fitness Test or how to clear a room, combatives, a medical situational training exercise and more.



Sgt. 1st Class Jason Scott does pushups during an obstacle relay Thursday at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, while competing for the title of Army Reserve Drill Sergeant of the Year. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. James Seals)

Staff Sgt. Emanuel Olivencia of Company D, 229th Military Intelligence Battalion, Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center in Monterey, California, was one of the nine competing for 2016 Advanced Individual Training Platoon Sergeant of the Year. He was impressed by his fellow competitors.

"It's been a challenge, in a very positive way," Olivencia said. "I'm learning a lot about myself, trying to measure up to the best NCOs out there. I can tell from their performance that we are striving and improving our force."

Staff
Sgt.
Jacob
Meyers
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Staff Sgt. Jacob Meyers works his way over an obstacle during the AIT Platoon Sergeant of the Year competition Thursday at Fort Jackson. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. James Seals)

Company D, 344th Military Intelligence Battalion in Pensacola, Florida, said he prepared for the heat and humidity by doing his training under the noontime sun in Florida. Meyers was also competing for AIT Platoon Sergeant of the Year.

"It's going pretty well," he said. "They don't tell us our scores, so as far as we know, we're all in the lead. I went to school with one of the competitors, Staff Sgt. Jonathan Sisk. He impressed me in school, and he's doing the same thing here. My roommate, Staff Sgt. Brandon Laspe, is an incredible competitor. Everybody out here is just giving it everything they've got."



Staff Sgt. Tyler Cushing, competing for 2016 Drill Sergeant of the Year, goes through a graded, on-camera media interview Thursday at Fort Jackson, South Carolina. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. James Seals)

The camaraderie was clearly growing as competitors got to know each other. Because it's a competition, that camaraderie included some trash talk as the NCOs took on the obstacle course Thursday.

After his turn on the course, Staff Sgt. Dominique Curry of Company C, 1-81 Armor Battalion, Fort Benning, Georgia, spent some time letting Staff Sgt. Christopher Johnson of Company E, 369th Signal Battalion, 15th Regimental Signal Brigade, Fort Gordon, Georgia, know that he might as well not waste his time trying to beat him. Both were competing to be AIT Platoon Sergeant of the Year.

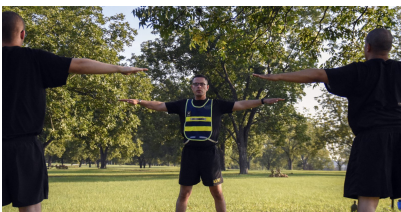


Staff Sgt. Brandon Laspe, competing to be named AIT Platoon Sergeant of the Year, works his way through an obstacle course Thursday at Fort Jackson, South Carolina. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. James Seals)

"I almost set a new course record," Curry told Johnson. "You might as well skip it. I would have set the record, but Usain Bolt was just a little bit ahead of me."

Johnson wasn't having it, though he admitted there were some strong competitors.

"I've been very impressed, both on the drill sergeant side and the platoon sergeant side," Johnson said. "I hope I win, first and foremost. But if I don't, it goes to show that [even as] a seasoned staff sergeant, I still have the grit and get-up about me to go and compete for these things. It shows I want to get better, do better and push my peers to get better as well."





Sgt. 1st Class Daniel Cummings trains Junior Soldiers on the Army Physical Fitness Test on Thursday at Fort Jackson, South Carolina. Cummings was competing for 2016 AIT Platoon Sergeant of the Year. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. James Seals)

Part of what makes the Drill Sergeant and AIT Platoon Sergeant of the Year competitions so special is that the winners don't just go back to their units. Instead, they spend a year working at the strategic level with Training and Doctrine Command.

Previously, they spent that year at the Center for Initial Military Training at Fort Eustis, Virginia. But this year the winners will do the same job out of Fort Jackson, said Command Sgt. Maj. Michael Gragg, command sergeant major of the CIMT. That way, necessary changes can more quickly reach the force.

"When they go out on the staff assistance visits with us, they can bring the lessons back to the schoolhouse and be like an adjunct professor to teach into the course the habits and trends that are in the field," Gragg said. "They can bring that right back into the schoolhouse to stop bad habits from happening."



Sgt. 1st Class Jason Scott enters the Multiple Simulation Training Facility to find a wounded Soldier during the Army Reserve Drill Sergeant of the Year competition Thursday at Fort Jackson, South Carolina. Scott must determine the status of the Soldier's injuries and well being, and administer first aid while gunfire blasts in the background. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. James Seals)

Sgt. 1st Class Samuel Enriquez is one of the organizers of this year's competition after winning the title of 2015 AIT Platoon Sergeant of the Year. Now finishing up his year of working at the TRADOC strategic level, he said the experience made him understand the Army better.

"It was an eye-opening experience," Enriquez said. "I was glad to experience the Army at a strategic level. Instead of seeing what other people have dictated down in policy, I got to actually see the decision-making process that affects the Army. I got to understand why the Army makes these crazy decisions that they make. Turns out they are not so crazy."

And last year's winners will be there to help the new champions find their way, said Staff Sgt. Jacob Miller, the 2015 Drill Sergeant of the Year.

"Once the winners are announced, they will have a crash course with me and the others about what to expect, and they'll have my number if they have any questions," Miller said. "Because there is going to be a lot thrown at them all at once. It's a very rewarding job, being able to represent the drill sergeants in the Army."

But a high-speed job for the winners is only part of what makes this particular Army competition special, Gragg said.

"The uniqueness of this competition is that these individuals, their sole mission, day in and day out, is to transform civilians into Soldiers," he said. "Unlike other Army jobs, the mission that these Soldiers do every day affects the defense of the constitution and the nation for the next 20 to 30 years. Because the Soldier they are training today could possibly have a 20- or 30-year career. They are possibly training the future Sergeant Major of the Army or Chief of Staff for the Army."

All 15 competitors made it through a lot to be here, but on Friday the best of the best will be chosen. Check the NCO Journal on Friday night to learn who came out on top.