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Excitement delayed, not denied

September 25, 2011 | By Art Carey, Inquirer Staff Writer

Sometimes thrills postponed are all the more thrilling.

Morning sprinkles had glazed the pavement, making it too hazardous for the Highway Patrol Motorcycle Drill Team to perform as originally scheduled at the 57th annual Hero Thrill Show at the Wells Fargo Center Saturday.

So, an hour and a half later, when burly police officers wearing white helmets and black leather jackets finally came roaring into the arena of Parking Lot H astride their mighty 850-pound Harleys, they were greeted by a collective "Wow!" that rose from stands filled with squirming kids whose patience had been sorely tested.

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"The louder you clap, the better they ride!" exhorted master of ceremonies Jimmy Binns, the enthusiastic president and CEO of the show.

As expected, the drill team officers dazzled and delighted as they formed diamonds and figure eights and crisscrossed within inches of one another while threading the needle.

"It's awesome," said Angela Sweeney, 22, who was there with her boyfriend.

"My grandpop was a firefighter, and my mom came here when she was younger to watch him."

The Hero Thrill Show is a piece of Americana preserved in amber.

The midway offering of cheesesteaks, sausage, hamburgers, and lemonade has a county-fair flavor, but the purpose of the show - saluting the everyday heroism of police officers and firefighters and raising money for the education of the children of those who have died in the line of duty - makes the event a special Philadelphia tradition.

"There's nothing like this anywhere else in America," said Binns, who took over the show six years ago when its survival was in doubt as attendance dwindled. "It's indigenous to Philadelphia and it's sui generis. It harks back to days when kids would worship cops."

The show began in 1954 after an explosion killed 10 firefighters. The inaugural event, held at what was then Municipal Stadium in South Philadelphia, had a cowboy theme and featured a 15-hour rodeo and Western movie stars Gene Autry, Roy Rogers, Dale Evans, and Tex Ritter.

"It was a big moneymaker in its day," said Tom Gibbons, 66, a former police motorcycle stunt rider and Inquirer police reporter who performed in the show in 1968 and '69 and whose father was police commissioner when the show was launched.

"When we did the show, there was more space, and the motorcycles reached speeds of 60 to 70 miles an hour. It was much racier and more dangerous than it is now."

It was a different period culturally as well.

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