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## Aiming for the Top, Expert Tree Climbers Face Off in the Forest

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In Competition for Arborists,  
Champ Came, Conquered  
And Won a Chain Saw

By SUSAN WARREN

NASHVILLE, Tenn.—Mark Chisholm craned his neck to peer up into the branches of a 110-foot tulip poplar, mapping out his plan of attack. A few minutes later, as a throng of spectators cheered, he scrambled up a slender rope and disappeared into the leafy canopy above.

For more than a quarter century, tree lovers have gathered once a year to compete in the International Tree Climbing Championships. It's the equivalent of the Olympics for professional tree trimmers, or "arborists" as they like to be called. Typically a laid-back affair, it has now sprouted an intense rivalry between two towering figures of the sport.

Last year, Bernd "Beddes" Strasser, a short and wiry German, won his fifth championship since 1999, dominating the event with his acrobatic climbing and jumping style. Mr. Chisholm broke the streak in 2001 and has been nipping at the German's heels ever since.



Mark Chisholm

The tree-trimming trade, which often involves using ropes and chain saws at dizzying heights, is dangerous business. Over the decades, the championship has become a way for arborists to swap safety tips, demonstrate new techniques and show off.

The business has grown in the past decade as more trees have been planted to beautify urban landscapes and city limits continue to creep outward into existing forests. About 17,000 arborists are now licensed by the International Society of Arboriculture, up from 5,000 in 1994.

The group is not your typical tree-hug-

ging crowd. Competitors—laden with harnesses, ropes and pulleys used to assist them in their ascents—look more like mountain climbers. Most people "just see a beautiful tree," explains Mark Young, an arborist in Kansas City, Mo. "An arborist looks at it and says, 'Oh my God, that thing's about to come down.'"

Tall and lean, Mr. Chisholm, 34 years old, is the profession's clean-cut poster boy. He's been the New Jersey state champion for 15 years running, co-owns his family tree-care business there, and works as a spokesman for German chain-saw maker Stihl Inc. A team of Italian arborists he trained this summer nicknamed him "the American Eagle."

The quiet and intense Mr. Strasser, 36, stands aloof from the congenial crowds. With long, blond dreadlocks and piercing eyes, he refers to trees as "poems" from the earth. He isn't strictly a tree trimmer, making a living collecting seeds from tree tops throughout Europe and selling them to farms and timber companies.

Earlier this month the two, along with 35 other climbers, faced off in the treetops of a 207-acre agricultural park here. Both men stumbled in the championship's first day of qualifications. Mr. Strasser drew a heavy penalty during the "work climb" event, which tests competitors' ability to move around at the top of a tree.

After bungling a line-throwing event, Mr. Chisholm returned to the sidelines tight-lipped, kicking the dirt with his toe. "It stings a bit. But it doesn't knock me out," he said.

Despite the setbacks, Mr. Chisholm finished ahead of the pack, with Mr. Strasser just behind him in the qualification round. The next day, they faced off in the Masters' Challenge, the deciding event of the competition. Using an intricate combination of safety ropes, climbers have to shinny up the park's towering tulip poplar and ring bells attached to four red flags planted in various places in the tree's outstretched limbs.

The final flag is set 40 feet out at the end of a fragile branch. If the climber puts too much weight on the limb, he sets off a buzzer, shedding points. One early contestant couldn't finish the event in time, while another made a series of technical mistakes, including setting off the buzzer, which knocked him out of the race.



Bernd Strasser

When Mr. Chisholm's turn came up, his rope throw was off, and his line snagged on a branch. As he burned up precious minutes trying to get it free again, his brother Stephen, also an arborist, paced anxiously on the sidelines. "He's killing me," he said.

Once aloft, he moved quickly from station to station. As he crawled on all fours along the final branch, the limb dipped, setting off the buzzer. He missed the 25-minute limit and looked to be out of the running.

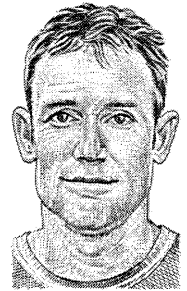
Mr. Strasser flew through the course. Scurrying to the end of the branches as if running on a sidewalk, he leapt from limb to limb and then wowed the crowd by dangling from his rope like a spider to ring the bell on the last flag.

Dan Kraus was up next. The 38-year-old redhead, with a dog named Bark, trims trees for the Seattle Preservation Society. He has a reputation as a purist who prefers strength and basic climbing skills to glitzy acrobatics. But his six previous attempts at the title failed, and many in the crowd of several hundred considered him a dark horse.

Instead of hurling his line by hand, Mr. Kraus used an established tool of the trade, a sort of giant slingshot mounted on a pole, to catapult his rope high into the tree. Setting his line quickly on the second try, he glided through the flag stations. He inched out to the end of the last, delicate limb with hardly a quiver. He finished his climb with a swooping Tarzan rope-swing down to the ground.

Mr. Strasser leapt forward to give the widely grinning Mr. Kraus a bear hug. The competition—and the championship—was too close to call. At an evening award ceremony, the judges, arborists themselves, announced the final scores. Mr. Strasser picked up 239.67 points out of a possible 300 for the event. Mr. Kraus, 243. Observers later said the decision came down to style: Mr. Kraus's simple, back-to-basics climb won out over Mr. Strasser's dazzling finesse.

Mr. Kraus carted off a new chain saw and a championship belt buckle, among other prizes. Mr. Strasser said prior commitments might prevent him from coming back next year. Mr. Chisholm, meanwhile, is already planning his return and said in a recent email that he's proud of this year's performance: "I told that tree who was boss."



Dan Kraus