



N E I G H B O R S

by Amber Hanneken

Like a spider traversing its web, Ann Koenig shimmies up a rope in under a minute. She pauses for a moment at the top, well within the branches of a large black walnut, and then quickly zips back down to the ground.

This task is called foot locking, and it is one of several skills Ann uses during tree climbing competitions. Unlike a child grabbing branches one at a time and pulling themselves up, a competitive tree climber depends on rope, equipment and safety skills.

"It's kind of both like the climbing skills you learn as a kid and rock climbing combined with a use of ropes," Ann says.

Ann, who says she is the only woman in the sport in the Midwest, has been climbing for the last three years. She has worked in forestry for 11 years and is an urban forester for the Missouri Department of Conservation.

Ann was born in Canada but grew up in Gasconade County. She attended the University of Missouri in Columbia where her love of plants and the outdoors inspired her degree in forestry.

"One reason I do this is because I love trees," Ann says. "I love all that is trees. I appreciate the skill that it takes to work on trees."

In 2002, Ann attended the International Society of Arboriculture annual conference in Seattle. There, she first witnessed the International Tree Climbing Championship where arborists and competitors from around the world showcase their tree climbing abilities in timed and point-based competitions.

"I saw the competition and thought, that is so neat," she recalls. "I was thinking about friends who would really like that, I was thinking about guys, but I wasn't really thinking about me doing it."

However, upon returning home she couldn't get the tree climbers out of her head. She was impressed with the skill of climbing and the competition but didn't know where to begin.

Someone who was no longer climbing gave her a saddle — the harness that surrounds a climber's waist and thighs. When she went to the conference the next year in Nashville, Tenn., she really studied the competition. She got advice about equipment, was given a climbing rope and was shown some of the basics.

When she got home, she began practicing in trees in her yard. After a year, she decided to participate in competitions sponsored by the Midwest chapter of the International Society of Arborists, which includes seven states.

"So I competed and I was really, really nervous but did my best," Ann says with a grin. "There are women in the world that do this, but there weren't any women in my chapter that year."

As the only woman, it was hard for Ann to tell how well she was doing.



Forester Ann Koenig demonstrates tree-climbing with the equipment and rope she uses during competitions.

Out on a Limb

As the Midwest's only female competitive tree climber, Ann Koenig reaches new heights

"Did I win? Did I lose? Was I average? It makes it hard for them to know what to do with me because there's only one of me."

By the second year, the chapter created standards in each event to determine if Ann could go on to the next level — international competition.

There are five events in the competition: foot locking; aerial rescue, where climbers must safely pull a dummy from a tree; a work climb, where they do tasks at different points of the branches; speed climb; and throw line, where competitors throw their rope into the tree.

Two events are exactly the same for both women's and men's divisions. On two other events,

women are allowed seven minutes while men are given five to complete the task. On the foot locking event, men climb 50 feet and women climb 40 feet.

It takes a lot of practice, but Ann finds no shortage of trees for the task around her Columbia home.

"Missouri's trees are great in general," Ann says. "I'll practice in trees in the yard, I'll go to the park. Generally tall trees offer a lot more opportunity. Rougher bark is a little easier to climb on because you can get a hold on it."

Up in the trees, Ann has encountered birds, squirrels and even a blacksnake. Sometimes these things can be dangerous. The safety ropes are such that if the climber lets go, they will not fall.

Climbing in the trees in her backyard may seem an unusual sight to some but Ann says her neighbors have been wonderful. Some have even given her tips from an observer's perspective and have been able to help her out when she's having difficulty with a climb.

"I'll be practicing and someone will be walking by and I'll say, 'Oh hello' and wave down at them and their dog and their dog is looking at me," Ann says. "It's been a lot of fun."

Besides tree climbing and working, Ann is also a wife and mother of two sons — Henry, 6, and Oliver, 3. On the mantel in their home sits a birthday gift from Henry. It is a tree made from a toilet paper roll and paper. Swinging by a string from the tree is a paper depiction of Mom.

"I'm very proud of that. He thought of doing that all on his own," Ann says as she shows off the artwork. "I was pleased to know he knew me well enough to make that."

To her kids, Ann's just Mom, but Henry compares her to Spider-Woman and asked if she'd climb for his birthday. She concedes that practicing and competing take a lot of work and time.

"If I didn't have a family that was totally 100 percent supportive I wouldn't be able to do it because it's hard. For me working and having a family, it seems like there's not enough time just for those two things. My husband is extremely supportive, and I wouldn't be able to do it otherwise."

Their family vacations often center on Ann's competitions. Last year, the championship was in Hawaii where Ann finished 14th out of 19. Her extended

family also has been a strong support, coming to competitions and cheering her on.

Although climbing is not a skill Ann uses in her professional field, she finds it brings her closer to the arborists she works with. It also gives her a different outlook on life.

"It's just a perspective you don't get otherwise," she says. "I wish I could give it to other people. It's really cool, and you get to know the tree better."

Ann will compete in this year's International Tree Climbing Championship in St. Louis' Forest Park, July 26-27. For more information call 888-472-8733 or e-mail ITCC@isa-arbor.com.