

Bernd Strasser: 2012 ITCC Champion

By Casey Clapp

Even after winning his 9th ITCC title, Bernd “Beddes” Strasser is still as humble as if it was his first time competing.

Strasser, who claimed championship titles in 1999, 2000, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2006, 2007, and 2008, sailed to victory again this year in Portland, Oregon, U.S. amidst stiff, yet friendly competition. Gliding through the Masters’ Challenge course, he used clever techniques and experience to swiftly, safely, and skillfully complete each station with several minutes to spare once returning to the ground.

Hailing from the ISA Germany Chapter, Strasser has been climbing trees his whole life. As a boy, he would collect beech seeds (*Fagus* sp.), with other boys, for use in nurseries. They soon found that there were a lot more beech nuts in the trees and began climbing to collect more seeds. After meeting the right people and saying “yes” to the right opportunities, he soon found himself climbing trees for all sorts of arboricultural tasks, and not only seed collection.

Strasser has been a self-employed climber for 23 years. Although he does have to spend some time in the office to run the business, he loves nothing more than being in a tree. Moving throughout a tree and experiencing the “arboreal world” is a very spiritual experience for Strasser, and it gives him a sense of accomplishment to aid in the health and longevity of trees. Through climbing and simply observing the life that exists in tree canopies, he maintains an immense respect for trees, nature, and an incredible joy in being a part of that world.

For him, climbing a tree is all about moving within the tree, and working with how the tree is shaped and how it grew. The tree climbing competition is something he enjoys, but he does not view it as a sport. Strasser strives to maintain perspective and admiration for trees as living organisms; he sees them as something to be discovered, as opposed to something that should be conquered. His respect for the tree and his love of the climb is what allows him to move so smoothly through the canopy; each movement simply comes naturally.

Strasser, and the women’s division champion Veronika Ericsson, both agree that climbing trees is more fun than work. Strasser notably enjoys using a throw line, yet the entire process provides him with great satisfaction.

He tries to climb as much as possible, but Strasser is also a husband and a father of two. While receiving his award during the opening ceremony of the conference, he said that although he was very thankful, he was looking forward to returning home to see his daughter take her first steps.

Strasser enjoys spending his spare time with family, and has also spent a good deal of time backpacking and simply being outdoors. He has climbed trees all over the world, many in tree climbing competitions, but also to teach classes and to explore. His favorite trees to climb are the beech trees of his native Europe.

Both Strasser and Ericsson note that it is fun to climb large trees, but tree height is not nearly as important as age. The older the tree, the more of a story it has to tell and the greater significance it holds to the site it is on. They both cherish the opportunity to climb elder trees, and harbor much respect for them.

Strasser intends to continue climbing and offers new climbers the advice of not looking at trees as a sport, but rather viewing them as something to explore. Each tree is different, and simply changing your perspective can allow you to see a tree as a new experience, rather than merely a new job.



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Veronika Ericsson: 2012 ITCC Champion

By Kate Leifheit

As the third contestant for the women's Masters' Challenge tree climbing competition, Veronika Ericsson walked through the roped-off aisle entrance of the course with a huge smile on her face, drawing applause and cheers from the crowd. As the last contestant, it was the middle of the afternoon and the sun was already setting to a 40 degree angle in the sky. Her competitors were Nicala Ward-Allen from the New Zealand Chapter, who won first place in this year's secured footlock competition, and Josephine Hedger, the 2010 ITCC Women's Champion who placed first in this year's work climb, from the United Kingdom/Ireland Chapter.

"There is a lot of enthusiasm and a lot of love in the community," Rebecca Seibel-Hunt, spectator and ISA Board Certified Master Arborist[®], commented during the event. "It's the best part of the international competition."

Ericsson started her climb by stepping into the pre-designated arena, scouting out the tree as the event clock counted down from its 30-minute time limit.

"I consider what sort of tree it is and the health and hazards in or around the tree," Ericsson said, recalling her approach for every single tree she climbs. "To get 'the eye' for a climb already on the ground takes a lot of experience, and still it's always important to be open minded because a tree can appear so different once you get up there."

Within 14 minutes and 50 seconds, Ericsson had finished her ascent, and in the next 30 seconds, completed her first station. All three stations were completed with 6 minutes and 24 seconds remaining on the clock. She immediately returned to the ground and had to get all her equipment out of the tree. She was doing well, but a moment of tension arose when a rope became stuck during her equipment removal process. The clock ticked down to 3 minutes and 40 seconds as she had just one more rope to remove from the tree. Finally, the second rope fell and Ericsson ran to untie the final rope from around the trunk. She finished with one minute left and spectators of the climb clapped and shouted in excitement and celebration.

"I know how it is to not get to finish your climb," Ericsson said. "To land on the ground this time, with two feet and a smile—that was a great feeling!"

Ericsson demonstrated her mastery of climbing techniques, use of equipment, poise in the tree, and safe working practices. She earned a total score of 176.33 points for her championship climb.

Ericsson comes to the climbing profession with a background in sailing. She started tree climbing about five years ago, when she was 24-years-old. Her father was a milk farmer and her mother a teacher. She said her parents' occupations gave her a passion for nature and physical work.

"They've always supported all my crazy missions, especially my father who thinks it's very practical that I can do all the tricky fellings in his forest," Ericsson said.

She is a self-employed contract climber and still works as a seaman. She travels and works with some of the best tree climbers around the world and is qualified as a European Tree Worker. To Ericsson, climbing trees is more of a lifestyle. She strives to learn the best techniques and works hard, continuously improving her performance because it is her living and it is what she loves.

Ericsson values the family atmosphere of tree climbing. Together with Eva Persson from Sweden and Melissa LaVangie from the United States, she organized the first women's tree climbing workshop in Sweden to give women a chance to climb in a relaxed environment. She hopes to put together more gatherings, similar to the Sweden workshop, in the future.

Ericsson said, "We are all winners by doing this together, and as an international member I hope we can make the 'T' in ITCC even bigger."

Kate Leifheit is ISA's educational products coordinator.

