

Surpassing Expectations: 2015 ITCC Masters' Challenge Champions

By Sonia Garth

How does one surpass their expectations to win an International Tree Climbing Championship? Is it years of determination and focus or the sheer enjoyment of competition? According to the 2015 ITCC World Champions, it could be either. Or maybe it's about keeping it simple and doing what you love every day.

This year's men's champion, 29-year-old James Earhart from Hustle, Virginia, U.S., has had his eyes on the title

since he fell in love with climbing competitions at the age of 15. He got his first taste of competitive climbing when he attended a local event (after reading a newspaper ad) where he watched ITCC past champion Michael Cotter compete. James has now been climbing for 15 years, and this was his fifth ITCC representing the ISA Mid-Atlantic Chapter. He averaged finishing in the middle of the pack until 2012 when he finished 7th overall. That finish inspired him to stay focused on winning the title, which he didn't expect to happen for another five years.

With a lot of strong climbers in the competition, James knew the scores could be tight, so his game plan was to just finish strong. Feeling confident in his performance in the preliminary events, he finished where he expected to—behind Mark Chisholm, Jared Abrojena, and Scott Forrest, his fellow Masters' finalists.

“Becoming ITCC men's champion has been an unwavering career goal, and it tires me just thinking of the amount of time I have spent training,” James acknowledged. Part of his training included eating healthier and getting more physically fit. This helped him drop some weight, which he feels made a difference in his movement through the tree and gave him better numbers in the



James Earhart, 2015 ITCC Men's Masters' Challenge Champion

speed events. James also practices Aerial Rescue techniques, since this is something he does not perform on a daily basis.

However, he feels practicing his strategy and climbing style were probably most helpful in earning him the championship. James observed some of the best climbers, spending countless hours watching video footage of champions such as Bernd “Beddes” Strasser, Scott Forrest, and James Kilpatrick.

“I studied their climbing style, their approach, how they transitioned from limb to limb, and their body and foot positioning.” He also credits both Forrest, three-time world champion, and Cotter, 1998 ITCC champion, for telling him to “keep it simple,” and that is what James feels he has learned most from this year’s competition—simple works.

Landing first run in the Masters’, this philosophy was key to James’ performance. He focused on a simple approach using minimal gear.

“I just kept thinking: I’m up against two three-time world champions and another world champion. Nobody wins on their first try.” Happy to be in the finals, he didn’t want to let anyone down. “I did my best to relax and just focus on the fact that I was in it, but that I could save the title until the next time.”

For Jamilee Kempton, from Waimanalo, Hawaii, U.S., the expectation was different. Having only been climbing for a few years, this was her third time competing at the



Jamilee Kempton, 2015 ITCC Women’s Masters’ Challenge Champion

ITCC for the ISA Western Chapter. As a strong newcomer, Jamilee made it to the Masters’ Challenge last year in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, U.S., in only her second year competing.

“I was excited and honored that I even made it to the Masters’ again this year,” Jamilee shared. As much as James was focused on winning, Jamilee was just as much focused on not winning. “At my first international in Toronto, I was nervous and unfamiliar. The competition wasn’t enjoyable. Milwaukee was much better, so now I just want to have fun and enjoy competing.”

She loves athletic challenges and considers tree work to be one of the most challenging things she does (which is why she loves it so much). Besides her work as an arborist, Jamilee prepares for competition by staying physically active and doing yoga.

“Yoga helps me handle stress by focusing on breathing and staying calm. Being

able to focus helps me enjoy competing.” This is the strategy Jamilee carried throughout the competition. She says she was focused on having fun and keeping it simple. “I wasn’t focused on winning—that way I was less nervous. I didn’t take it too seriously, had fun, and it felt like a solid day. I was happy no matter what happened.”

Jamilee’s relaxed approach won her placements in four of five events, leading her to finish first in the preliminaries with a total of 145.20 points out of a possible 200. It also helped her set the new World Record in the women’s 15 meter secured footlock, with a time of 20.16.07 seconds.

For her climb in the Masters’ Challenge, Jamilee’s approach did not change. With no expectations of winning, she wanted to have fun and felt more prepared than last year because she spent more time doing production tree work.

“I approached the Masters’ tree like I would a tree at work—keep it simple and don’t over complicate. I chose a route for my climb that was exactly what I would have done at work, so I was comfortable with the choices I made.”



Jamilee Kempton



Lessons from the Field

Keeping it simple worked for these two champions, as did approaching the events like they would a regular tree care task. When asked how participating in climbing competitions helps on the job, James, an ISA Certified Arborist® and owner/operator of Arbor Care Complete Tree Service, says the benefits are priceless. Even though he has been climbing and working full time since he was 17 years old, he feels participating in climbing competitions still increases safety and productivity.

“The examples of the gear inspection process and practical safety are important. I try not to use gear at work that I know would not pass inspection at a competition or that wouldn’t be allowed.” James also stated, “Competitions break up the year when you work a job that can be difficult and demanding. They make you focus on climbing trees like you would in a comp, which can up your production.” He feels that competing also drives climbers to be more physically fit, which has carry-over benefits on the job because it can help reduce personal injury.

Jamilee, also an ISA Certified Arborist®, was introduced to arboriculture as a career option in 2011. She’s in agreement that the ITCC’s emphasis on safety and safe work practices is most beneficial. Her partner and biggest fan, Steve Connoley introduced her to the world of competitions,

which she credits for giving her the foundation for understanding safe work practices like the gear inspection process.

“These things often get overlooked on a day-to-day basis,” Jamilee admitted. “I progressed more quickly as a climbing arborist because I knew how to be safe.” The safety reminders that climbers get during competition are helpful because they don’t necessarily get those on the job. “Communication is important for safety, so reminders about rope angles helps me feel safer and I can implement safer practices at work.” Even with events like the aerial rescue that climbers may not perform regularly. “It helps to remember the steps we don’t normally think about and the importance to communicate.”

Climbing with Perspective

When asked how ITCC and climbing competitions impact the industry, both champions believe the competition events provide a good foundation for safe work practices and reflect what good pruning arborists do on a daily basis.

As James says, “We are not ‘tree guys’ using spikes, safety is reflected well.” He feels the Work Climb and Masters’ Challenge are most representative of what pruning arborists do.

Jamilee values the industry’s growth through the introduction of new techniques and technologies, including the incorporation of single rope technique using devices such as the Rope Wrench, which she and the two other women finalists used in the Masters’ Challenge.



James Earhart

James and Jamilee’s love for the competition, and support for fellow competitors, is easy to see when watching these two compete. Both are prior recipients of the ITCC Spirit of the Competition Award, which recognizes competitors who promote camaraderie, demonstrate interest in helping others, and strive to gain the most of their experience. This spirit continues to show in their eagerness to offer words of encouragement for others hoping to capture the championship one day.

James encourages climbers to do their homework and be mentally, physically, and technically prepared. “Be patient and consistent, and it may come sooner than you think.” He also recommends that competitors study the score sheets to learn how to make points. “It is not a mystery what the judges are looking for, climb to the score sheet.”

Jamilee wants competitors to remember to keep it simple and focus on fun. “Don’t take the competition too seriously, remember it is a time for everyone to come together to share techniques, ideas, and network so we can all become safer and more efficient climbers.”

They also both plan to “pay it forward” to help others in the industry. James and Jamilee acknowledge and appreciate the amount of hard work that volunteers commit each year to make the ITCC happen, and so look

forward to volunteering themselves. James has already demonstrated his support for his chapter.

"We are extremely proud of James. He is not only an excellent climber but a great team player and teacher. He gives back to the chapter by sharing his knowledge and time by presenting at our annual meeting and day of safety," Nancy Herwig, executive director, ISA Mid-Atlantic Chapter, stated. "James' enthusiasm, respect, intelligence, and calmness are apparent in the way that he climbs, and also in his interactions with people. He is a true champion."

Jamilee would love to see more women involved in the competition, both as competitors and as volunteers. She does her part to encourage women by teaching women's tree climbing workshops at the Lyon Arboretum in Hawaii.

Rose Epperson, executive director, ISA Western Chapter, said, "Jamilee's natural ability works in concert with her will and professional spirit to make her a true champion. We are so proud of her." Jamilee feels it is important for women climbers to be able to participate at the International event because of the strong support system. "Most often at chapter competitions, you only have a few women or even just one. So it is cool to go to the international and be among so many women competitors."

For James, encouraging future arborists is his goal. He wants to influence kids the way he was influenced as a young teenager by sharing the knowledge he has gained over the years. "I want kids and others to feel comfortable coming to me with questions, and be able to give them the kind of attention that I received at that first climbing competition."

When asked to reflect on the championship titles, both are still letting the reality sink it and enjoying the moment.

"After watching the talented climbs of the other two women, I was surprised that I won," Jamilee said.

James had a similar thought while watching Scott Forrest climb in the Masters'. "I knew Scott would win. I saw his climb and I knew it was close, but felt I would probably be second." But James did finish first. He and Scott had a tied score, but James possessed the quicker time—a perfect reflection of the increase in the skill and quality of the competitors at the ITCC.

In looking to next year in San Antonio, Texas, U.S., climber preparation includes staying fit and focusing on those aspects of the event that are not necessarily part of their daily work routine. So until the 2016 ITCC, they will focus on what they do best and enjoy the ride. As James reflected, "The journey itself is the reward, not the destination."

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(Janesville, Wisconsin, U.S.)*