

By Colleen Hoffman

Climbing trees isn't just something Bernd "Beddes" Strasser does. It's a way of life. From his boyhood in a small forest town in Germany to his competition-winning performance in Pittsburgh at the International Tree Climbing Championship in August 2004, trees have been a powerful force in shaping his life.

Strasser's victory this year has won him, once again, the title of men's international

tree climbing champion, making him the only climber in the history of ITCC to win the title five times. It is a title that most of the competitors and spectators agree he deserves.

Strasser grew up with trees all around him. As a little boy, he lived in a small German town surrounded by forests. One day, there was an ad in a local paper offering

Strasser Takes Men's Title for Fifth Time

money for people to collect seeds from a stand of beech trees in the forest. He and some other children went out and picked up seeds from the ground around the beeches to earn a little pocket money. It didn't take them long to realize there were a lot more seeds in the trees than there were on the ground. They soon were climbing

around the canopy, shaking seeds down onto mats on the forest floor. Strasser has been climbing ever since.

As a young man, Strasser left Germany to travel the world, spending large amounts of time in the forests and wilderness of Alaska and Canada. Ever ready for adventure, Strasser has many stories to tell about his travels, including the time he built a raft out of logs and floated down the Yukon River in the Arctic.

Throughout his time abroad, his family, including two brothers and two sisters, was, and continues to be, important to him.

"They let me go," he says, "but were always there when I needed them."

After returning to Germany, Strasser started a business in 1990 called Baumkletterteam, or "Tree Climbing Team." The team is made up of a group of climbers who work together on various climbing jobs, which includes a great deal of seed and cone gathering for research contracts. With these other



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climbers, Strasser spends hours working with trees, climbing and even living in them.

"I've often slept in the trees [on a portledge]," he explains. "It's an incredible experience."

Since first competing in the ITCC in 1994, Strasser has used the opportunity to display some of his amazing climbing skills. However, showing off was never his motive.

"The main reason for coming [to ITCC] is the warmth of the other climbers, the open hearts, the exchange of ideas, and the increased awareness of trees," he says.

He views the recent addition of the women's competition as a great thing.

"I've enjoyed the competition more since there are women present" he says. "It's good to have the energy they bring."

The comments most frequently heard by people describing his climbing style include "fluid," "dynamic," "natural," "graceful,"

and, always, "amazing!" Strasser explains that his climbing skills spring from a deep love of nature, the outdoors, and trees.

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In his climbing philosophy, every tree is an alive, dynamic element, and he believes there is something to be learned from his contact with each one. This passion is evident to anyone who speaks with him or sees him climb.

"I'm on holiday 365 days a year," Strasser says. "Tree climbing is something you do professionally, but you

have to do it with the heart, not because you see dollar signs in the tree."

When asked about how he trains for competition, the champion says he doesn't really do anything extra, other than take an occasional run.

"Daily work is training enough!" he says.

He adds, however, that an important component of his training is a healthy lifestyle.

"A healthy life involves the whole body, diet, and lifestyle. I don't eat meat; I don't set pressure on myself."

He also stresses the importance of stretching every day, after every climb.

"You see these older climbers that are bent over," he says. "They are all tight; they have no room to breathe. You have to stretch to keep your body healthy."

During competition, Strasser keeps his attitude positive, refusing to become anxious or pressured.

"Whenever I approach an event, I tell myself 'this is my favorite event,'" he says.

With this year's ITCC now behind him, Strasser has no plans for slowing down. In the weeks immediately following August's competition, he and the Tree Climbing Team were scheduled to begin work on a contract to pick 25 tons of Douglasfir cones. The cones were to be collected from a seed stand of trees approximately 100 years old and between 145 and 165 feet tall. To accomplish this task, Bernd gathered a group of 15 climbers, including several women.

In November, Strasser is looking forward to traveling to New Zealand, where he will teach a series of climbing workshops.

"I really enjoy the country," he says. "The people are open and ready to learn."

And as for next year's ITCC? Strasser says he doesn't really know, but he isn't planning on leaving the trees any time soon.

"I don't believe age is a limiting factor," he says. "I'll always climb."

STRASSER

