

Tree climbers have been scaling new heights at Olds College.



Garrett Smith, Applied Degree Student in the Aerial Rescue event.

From May 30 to June 1, the School of Horticulture's Arboriculture program hosted the International Society of Arboriculture Prairie Chapter 2008 Tree Climbing Championship (TCC).

Charlene Scott, Women's Division Champion, Ken Moore, Men's Division Champion and Laurie Newsham, Chair of the Championship.



"The purpose of the event is to bring climbing arborists together from across the Canadian Prairie to display their skills, expertise and safe work-practices to the public," says Laurie Newsham, organizing committee chair and arboriculture instructor at the College.

"Both the women's champion and the men's champion went on to represent the Society at the International Championship held this year in St. Louis, Missouri in July."

Seven competition events were held on the green space and in the trees between Duncan Marshall Place and Frank Gnsdale Hall on campus. "In the Work Climb, the climber must complete five different tasks throughout the tree canopy that are a common part of the workday in a tree," he added. "They must do this as fast and as safely as they can. Typically, it takes up to 10 exciting minutes to complete."

The crowd-pleasing Aerial Rescue event involved the assessment of an injured climber (a lifelike mannequin). "The competing climber follows high angle emergency protocols and then accesses the injured climber in order to safely lower him to the ground," said Newsham. "This is an exciting event because so few emergency services are trained in extricating casualties from within tree canopies. "Good arborists practice emergency response/aerial rescue regularly in order to be ready if such a situation occurs."

Other competitions included the Belayed Speed Climb and the Footlock Event. "The judges look for the finesse and fluid movement of the climber in the tree," he added. Charlene Scott is an Olds College grad who majored in Arboriculture (2007). She was one of the many featured competitors this weekend.

"I've been preparing for the event by practicing the various skills required for the competition," she said. "But I also use this weekend as a way to meet fellow arborists in the industry and to learn from them." As well, she views the weekend's events as a great opportunity to create awareness of arboriculture. "Maybe it will inspire a few individuals to pursue a career in the field themselves," she said.

The Arboriculture program at Olds College has a high percentage of hands-on training. "Every graduate from our program has the opportunity to acquire the skills necessary to compete successfully in this championship," said Newsham. "The skills required for every event are discussed and presented in class, as well as practiced and performed."

Arboriculture is a growing industry, he noted. "Our graduates have an abundance of job opportunities to choose from," he said. But he was quick to point out that the ability to climb trees is only part of the job description. "An arborist must understand soil, water and plant relationships," he said. "They must understand the role of insects in the urban forest. Our graduates learn these things."