

# Tree climber training gets up to business

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Copy Editor

I don't live near any rock walls, but I am overshadowed by an assortment of huge trees—Douglas firs, ponderosa pines and white oaks, the quintessential Oregon trio. I thought it would be cool to get up into those trees and use them for fun instead of just staring up at them, cursing their never-ending downpour of limbs, leaves and needles. Here I have recreation right in my front yard—no need to drive for miles in order to maim myself far from home.

So I signed up for Tree Climber Training (HOR 239), expecting to rub shoulders with a handful of ecoterrorists-in-training. Instead, instructor Terry Flanagan immediately handed each of us a hefty course outline, which listed possible opportunities in utility line clearance, commercial and municipal arbor care and at Hoyt Arboretum as a volunteer tree climber. The first sentence he wrote under "Grading" was "This is not a 'basket-weaving' course." Okay, so I wouldn't have to grow my hair long or stop shaving.

The one-credit course is only four weeks long, from 8 a.m. to noon on Saturdays in October, so Flanagan got us

down to business quickly. Flanagan is an arboricultural consultant and has done tree surveys for CCC in preparation for its new building construction. Previously, he was a manager for General Tree Service and has over 25 years' experience working in trees. His arms are solidly muscled lethal weapons, so I listened and tried not to annoy him.

Safety was the first priority. We went through electrical hazards, tree inspections, clear communication and personal protection equipment. All of the money and equipment for the class was donated, mostly by Asplundh and Trees Inc., (two utility line clearance services), Portland General Electric, Pacific Power & Light, Collier Arbor Care, Organicare and Rich's Tree Service; we were well equipped with hard hats, safety glasses, ropes, saddles, saws and carabiners. This is not a cheap thrill.

Before even standing near a tree, we had to learn knot tying. Knots are as much of a climber's lifeline as his rope, and they are either done correctly or not. No "almosts" here. Assistant instructor Joe Mendez, the "gadget guru," very patiently helped us to tie, dress and set our contorted tangles. Repeating our half-hitches, "rabbit comes out of the hole, goes around the tree, then back in the hole" bowline knot and the crucial Blake hitch under the watch of the instructors gave us enough familiarity to practice at home. This is absolutely necessary, as I found out at the final exam.

We learned how to get our climbing ropes securely over a limb using a slickline weighted with a small, shot-filled canvas bag. My first miserable attempts instantly improved as soon as I relaxed. But still, the hard hat was greatly appreciated by those closest to me. We got to take the throwlines and throwbags home, with an admonishment from Flanagan to practice.

We were supposed to use a "modified body thrust" to reach a limb 12 or 15 feet up. Mendez, a former rock climber and now a high climber for the Urban Forestry division of the Portland Parks and Recreation Department, made sure our knots were tied correctly so Flanagan didn't lose any students. I leaned back in the saddle, pulled up my legs as far as possible (gotta do those stretching exercises now), locked the rope around both feet, stood up and advanced the friction hitch up the rope. Then repeated it. Again. And again. I looked around and I was just about eye level with my six-foot-tall climbing partner. This is *real work*. Mendez sauntered over and asked what hurt more, my legs or my arms.

I told him my lungs, and I vowed to quit smoking. Descending was, of course, much easier, but the temptation to let it rip on the way down was just too great—Flanagan warns me about safety and overheated ropes. It was also a lot of fun. The "full body pain" wouldn't hit until the next day.

It was a very intense course with a lot of information, more than we could utilize in four classes, and as Mendez said at the end, "This is barely scraping the surface of all there is to climbing." But we had a good base of knowledge, enough so we could buy some equipment and practice on our own since, as I mentioned before, Flanagan had hammered safety practices into us. He said that we already knew more than some people who were working for tree services.

Most of the students were taking the course as part of the Horticulture program, and one is volunteering at Hoyt Arboretum. Volunteering is a great way to learn more about tree climbing and see if this is something you want to pursue.

Damon Schrosk, a wetlands biologist, took the class so he could prune his tall pines but would like to use tree climbing in his future business of rural land management. He has already bought some used equipment and started climbing at home. He continued, "I've been about 85 feet up one of my pines...I was spinning and swimming through the canopy like a spider. It was awesome. I would take a whole series of these courses if they were offered." He said he would like to learn more of the basics such as limb walking and move on to more advanced skills, like aerial rescue.

Flanagan said about half the class expressed interest in continued training. But he added, "You never know. It's a bug that bites you. You think you're going to walk away from it, but it pulls you right back in."

Flanagan hopes to have a longer 6-week basic course next fall and an intermediate class in Spring 2003. This was the second year tree climber training has been offered, and 13 students enrolled, up from eight last year. Although it is for occupational training, Flanagan welcomes students interested in recreational climbing. (He didn't say anything about tree-sitting protestors.) I am now applying to the Power Line Clearance and Tree Trimming Apprenticeship Program in Portland so I can make money doing interesting, albeit slightly dangerous, work.

To learn more about tree climber training, contact Terry Flanagan at (503) 670-1995 or Bruce Nelson in the Horticulture Department at x2786.



PHOTOGRAPHER / Clackamas Print

Instructor Terry Flanagan (left) critiques the climbing skills of student Jef Gray while Allan Wilson (back) and Jennifer Whiting prepare to go up next.



Assistant instructor Joe Mendez shows off some high-rise chainsawing.

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