



Tree climber competition branches to new heights

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Updated: 04/25/2009 11:31:01 PM EDT

BRIDGEPORT -- As her father quickly made his way back down the tree, Laura Duarte, 12, looked on with admiration. "My dad's really fast," the Stratford resident said.

She's not going out on a limb when she says that. Last year, her father, Moris Duarte, won the annual Connecticut Tree Climbing Competition. He was back again Saturday hoping to reclaim his crown.

But Daniel J. Weise of Middlebury, owner of Weise Choice Tree Services, claimed the top prize, from among 25 competitors. He now moves on to New England-level competition.

This year's Connecticut contest was held at Beardsley Park and featured five different events: the secured footlock, throwline accuracy, belayed speed climb, work climb and aerial rescue. Participants scores are based on their performance in each of the activities.

Duarte estimated it took him about 23 seconds to climb up the tree and ring the bell in the speed climb. He wasn't as happy with his performance in the throwline accuracy.

In that event, contestants have six minutes to set three different working lines in specified parts on a tree by tossing a small, weighted bag attached to a thin line up and over the limb they're trying to reach. The throw line is then used to pull a climbing line up into the tree.

Duarte aimed high -- the highest marked branches would garner seven points. His first attempt got snagged on a small branch, so he pulled it back down and tried again. The next attempt made it to the mark, but failed to catch. With just a little over a minute left, Duarte was able to get one of the five-point branches and attach the climbing rope.

"That tree has a lot of buds at the ends of the branches," Duarte said, "very slippery." He said while he's placed first in this event in the past, "I think this time I'll place last."

The work climb is the event Duarte said he prefers, and several of his fellow competitors agreed.

"Some of the other events are just rough, too much like work," said Southbury resident Brian Carpenter. The work climb consists of five stations set up in a tree and the men are scored as they move through the tree completing assigned tasks. Scores are based on time, completion of assignments and attention to safety.

"After 18 years of tree work this is something fun to do," Carpenter said. "It's not arduous work and you learn new things from the other climbers."

Chris Donnelly, a member of the organizing committee, said the annual event is as much about getting the climbers together, and sharing tips and learning, as it is competing. Sponsored by Connecticut Tree Protective Association, Inc., the competition also provided the city of Bridgeport with some free tree work.

"There was about \$4,000 to \$5,000 worth of tree cutting and pruning done by the volunteers who came to prep the site," Donnelly said.

This year's event didn't have any female competitors, something Donnelly said they'd like to

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Amanda Weise, a Beacon Falls resident, competed last year. "I don't know of any other women actively competing in Connecticut," she said. "There are a few out there though. We can do it, we have the strength to do it and I think the guys would love to have us here."

She didn't take part this year, she said, because she didn't have enough free time to practice. "If I'm not climbing safe, I'm not climbing," said Amanda Weise, who learned to climb from her brother Daniel, this year's winner.

Amanda Weise might one day have a climbing companion in young Laura Duarte. "My dad's hoping me or my brother will do this," she said. "It seems kind of dangerous, but yet fun. I like climbing trees."

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