

Climbers head for top in contest

They love the competition, the challenge, the awesome view, and of course, the majestic tree.

Dave Spilsbury and Dan Stevens are professional tree climbers who get to practice their love of the sport every day at work. Spilsbury owns Tree Doctors North, a tree pruning, health care and removal business in Scottsdale. Stevens works for the family-owned company as a foreman.

"It's exhilarating," said Spilsbury, 36, a married dad of five. "It's a chance to test yourself. There's always that element of fear. It's an extreme sport. If you mess up, you have that potential to die."

The two Mesa men are competing Saturday in the five events of the Western Chapter Tree Climbing Competition at the Boyce Thompson Arboretum. The first-place winner gets a gold-leaved tree belt buckle and a trip to the next competition in Hawaii. The other winners get chain saws and tree-climbing gear.

The climbers will be rated on speed, style and how they move through the 100-foot-plus red gum eucalyptus trees. They'll use heavy ropes, pulleys, special knots, protective head gear and glasses, and other climbing gear to ascend, descend and climb through the large trees.

"I love to be around trees, and love to climb them," said Stevens, 26, a married dad of three. "I even like to travel around and climb trees. It's difficult finding good trees to climb. We've been kicked out of many parks."

Spilsbury became hooked on trees after he started working with his dad, who has a doctorate in plant science. He started climbing trees in 1989, and competing in 2001. He also helped bring the first local tree-climbing event in 2004 as a board member of the Arizona Community Tree



TIM HACKER, TRIBUNE

HANGING AROUND: Dave Spilsbury, left, and Dan Stevens, both of Mesa, demonstrate their tree-climbing skills in a 50-foot eucalyptus tree in Scottsdale.



HAYLEY RINGLE
TRIBUNE COLUMNIST

Council. Stevens placed first and Spilsbury placed second in the local competition.

"I love to watch people that are excellent at it," said Spilsbury, who placed first in the 2005 and 2006 local competitions. "It's like watching world-class gymnasts."

Stevens started climbing professionally in 2001, and started competing the next year. He placed 11th in his first competition and second in one of the speed climbs. He's been competing each year since,

and last year took third in the Western Chapter Competition, which has climbers from California, Nevada, Hawaii and Arizona.

Someday he wants to climb tall redwoods and travel to Australia, where the tallest eucalyptus trees grow.

To climb a tree one must not have a fear of heights; be in good shape, as tree climbing requires the use of the full body; be good at tying knots; and be able to read a tree.

Before climbing a tree, the climber first does a ground inspection, looking for power lines, invasive insects and splits or cracks in the tree that might make for a dangerous climb.

Once the men secure a throw line at a tall branch, they can climb up the tree using ropes in a matter of seconds. Using their rope safety

Climbing competition

What: Western Chapter Tree Climbing Competition

When: 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday

Where: Boyce Thompson Arboretum, 37615 U.S. Highway 60, Superior

Cost: \$7.50 for adults, \$3 for children 5-12

Info: (520) 689-2723 or <http://arboretum.ag.arizona.edu>

guards and climbing saddles, they swing from branch to branch and climb out on tree limbs with ease in the 50-foot eucalyptus tree they practiced in on Monday at a Scottsdale apartment complex.

"Trees are just majestic," Spilsbury said. "It's amazing to be around something that massive. And the shade is definitely a gift, especially here in Arizona."