



Jenkins (in red hat) and some of his students hang around the oak tree to talk climbing.

## TREE CLIMBERS ARE HAPPY OUT ON A LIMB

BY TOM CHAFFIN ■

Dangling from a rope 55 feet up in an oak tree, psychologist Betsy Hoddinott, 42, is as stuck as a cheap zipper. The first half hour of her climb went well enough, but now there seems to be a problem with a knot and some of her gear. That's why Peter Jenkins, speaking in the calming tones of an air-traffic controller talking down a nervous pilot with a bad engine, is explaining to Hoddinott what she must do to free the rope.

Jenkins waits a few minutes, then calls up, "How you doin'?"

"I'm O.K.," Hoddinott answers, "but this knot is tightening up on me." Her voice, though calm, is tinged with the anxiety of someone who is stuck high in a tree. Barely visible from the ground, she alternates between hanging limp from the rope and uncomfortably straddling the limb. To reach the jammed knot on her rope she needs to gain about two feet. That would be no problem ex-

cept that she already has disengaged the pin in her foot-cam, a mechanical device worn on one shoe and designed to help facilitate ascents. (When the pin is engaged, the foot-cam encircles the climbing rope allowing it to move freely as long as you are climbing upward. As soon as you start to move down, however, the pin bites into the rope.) The reason Hoddinott had disengaged the pin from her foot-cam was to prepare for her now-stalled descent. She will have to reengage it—a maneuver not unlike changing a boot while standing on a fourth-floor building ledge—to reach the knot.

Hoddinott, like the dozen or so others here in a vacant lot in Atlanta, is a member of Tree Climbers International (TCI). Jenkins, 40, a wiry, mustachioed man who sports a red beret embossed with a green pine tree, is a tree surgeon and TCI's president and founder. He or-

ganized TCI three years ago to spread the gospel of recreational tree climbing. Of course, there's nothing new about climbing trees. Kids do it, tree surgeons do it, educated arborists do it. But what Jenkins wanted was to invent a new sport—to establish tree climbing with the use of ropes as a recreational activity with the recognition factor of, say, rock climbing or waterskiing.

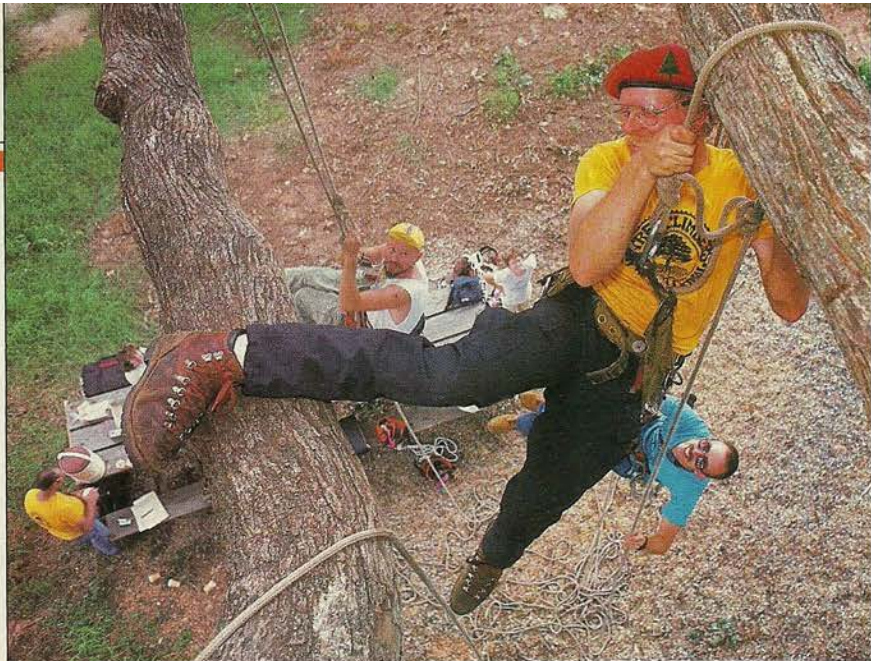
On this Sunday afternoon, in the lot which Jenkins owns and where TCI regularly meets, at least 14 strands of rope dangle from two 90-foot-high white oak trees—giving the scene the appearance of an outsized, outdoor marionette theater. Typically, up to 20 people will stop by for a climb—some to rekindle a childhood love of scurrying up trees, some to overcome old fears, some to learn how to do something new. Still others come to hone their skills: A reformed mountaineer and "builderer" (a climber of buildings) says he still likes to climb but no longer wants to push his luck on cliffs and buildings. A tree surgeon revels in the joy of climbing without being burdened by saws and other gear of his trade. Two professional banner hangers from New York City say they come just to learn a few new tricks from Jenkins.

Tree climbing, as practiced by TCI, borrows techniques and equipment used in tree surgery, rock climbing and caving. Jenkins discourages "unprotected" climbs, so each of his climbers wears around his or her waist a "saddle" secured by rope to a limb. In addition to teaching climbing and developing rules for safety, Jenkins also puts out *Tree Climber*, a quarterly magazine mailed to TCI's 250 members in North America and Europe. *Tree Climber* covers techniques, equipment and adventures. There are comparisons of butt-strap saddles and leg-strap saddles, an account of a squirrel attack and stories about confrontations with park officials attempting to discourage tree climbing. Jenkins has also fashioned a one-to-six scale, similar to the one used by rock climbers, to measure the difficulty of an ascent. As a former rock climber, Jenkins admits a certain defensiveness.

"Some rock-climbing guys pooh-pooh tree climbing," he says. "They don't understand it. Tree climbing can be technical and difficult."

Nevertheless, there are key differences. A rock climber, who relies on his feet more than a tree climber does, often cannot see the toe jam upon which his next move will depend. "Tree climbing is not nearly as dangerous as rock climbing, because you can see where your protection is," Jenkins says. "You see where your rope is draped over a branch. And as long as the branch is not a weak or dead branch, you can pretty much count on it being able to hold you."

Such advantages, he adds, set recreational tree climbing apart from more perilous professional tree climbing. The vocation of tree surgery often requires climbing dead trees or trees injured by weather. While tree surgeons work "wild" trees, recreational climbers ascend "tame" trees—those already inspected and worked by a lead climber,



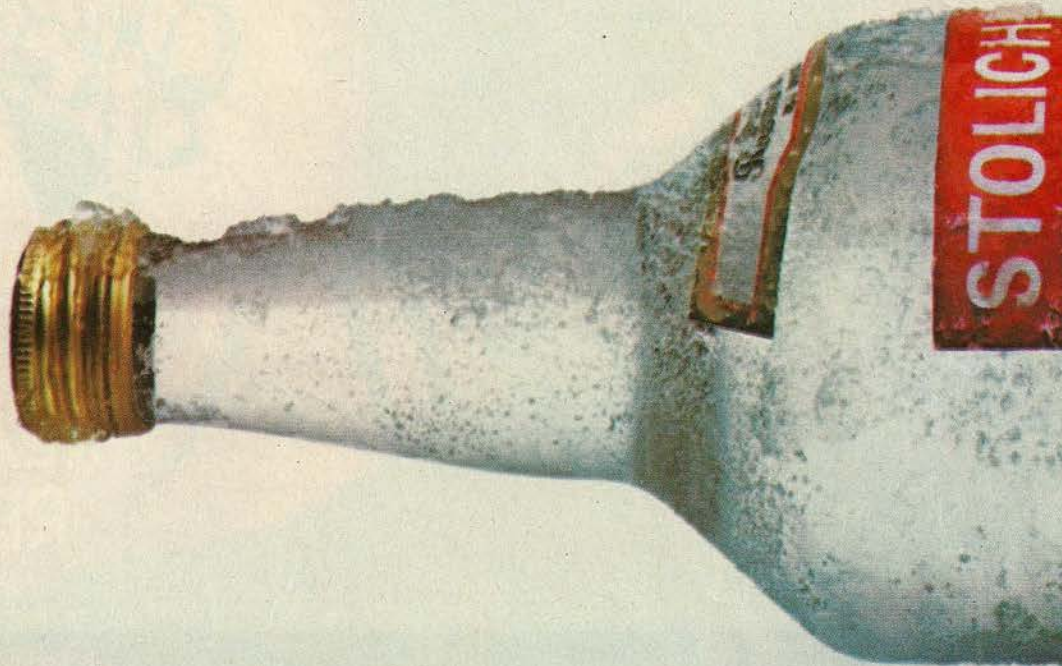
KEVIN KOLCZYNSKI

who removes dead limbs and checks that no bees or squirrels or snakes or puddles of sap will surprise those who follow. (A recent *Tree Climber* story recounts the painful plight of a "delirious climber plastered in bees 50 feet up." Fire and police units were summoned to rescue him.)

As a sport, tree climbing is wide-

**Teaching people to climb is a busman's holiday for Jenkins, who is a tree surgeon.**

ranging. Any serious climber, naturally, waits for that special summer trip to Northern California. Jenkins set his personal height record in 1986 on a 357-foot coastal redwood, the fifth-tallest tree ever measured. His favorite Eastern



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tree is the American beech. "It's a very smooth bark, like elephant hide," he says. "The rope runs well over it. You can swing your legs over it and roll over the branch—a smooth, graceful tree."

He also says, "Pines are nice trees to climb—depending on which pines you climb. Some white pines are real sappy, and you get your ropes trashed out. Your loblolly pines and your black pines are really flaky, and you've got to wear goggles, because, as you climb, tons of flakes come off. You've also got to wear gloves, because those flakes are razor sharp, and a flake running up your fingernail, that's bad news." For excitement, there's nothing like a loblolly on a windy day. "Because of their exceptional height they have to be limber and bend with the wind," says Jenkins. "They have a 10- to 20-foot sway at the top in a high wind. I like the ride. It's like a roller coaster. After a cold front has gone through, you can be up there all day, the tree rocking like crazy. And it's

safe, as long as you know the tree you're climbing. If you know that it doesn't have a rocky base and it's a green tree, it's very safe to climb."

Stalled climber Hoddinott is in a safe enough tree this afternoon. But she has been stuck now for 45 minutes. Only one other climber has not yet returned to the ground, and there are nervous jokes about calling the fire department or ordering a pizza as Hoddinott tries to get her foot-cam back on.

"I think it's about time Tree Man goes for a rescue," someone says to Jenkins.

"Betsy, do you want me to come up there?" Jenkins calls.

"No!" comes the answer.

After a few more minutes, Jenkins decides that it is time to go.

"She's O.K.," he says, putting on his foot-cam. "She's protected twice [by two ropes]. But putting on that foot-cam can be pretty hard when you're just hanging up there."

As Jenkins prepares to climb, Hoddinott, from her dangling perch, comments to no one in particular, "This would be real different if I thought I could fall."

Jenkins chuckles, but the concern in his blue eyes is real. "She's been up there a little too long," he says.

By now nervous jokes have given way to silence as Jenkins, with the apparent ease of a winged insect, foot-cams his way up the rope. In less than two minutes he reaches Hoddinott. He makes the needed adjustments on her ropes and foot-cam, and within five minutes both are back on the ground.

A few weeks ago Hoddinott had dreaded the task of standing on a step-ladder to change a light bulb. Today she appears unshaken by her adventure, a paragon of urban grace under pressure. Yes, she says, she will have a beer now. ■

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*Tom Chaffin, a free-lance writer in Atlanta, likes to keep his feet on the ground.*

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