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SOUTHEAST OHIO

WINTER 2011

Jack of all Blades
Timber Tournaments

$2.95
Jack of all Blades

A cutting-edge competition for the love of lumber

Matt Cogar readied his green crayon—his tool of choice for signatures—and applied his autograph to the large wooden disks resting in the hands of two boys. With thanks, they rushed into the crowd looking for some more international attention. It’s a standard scene for Matt. His talent and expertise with the chainsaw prompts much admiration.

Matt is a lumberjack, a warrior of wood, a champion of the chop. He can cut through a 12-inch wide log of white pine faster than most people can brush their teeth. He has spent hundreds of hours polishing axes, saws and chainsaws, devoting his time and effort to mastering the fine specifics of cleaving wood. In recent years, though, lumberjacks have wandered away from the forest. Instead, their sport shows itself on stages across the world.

Lumberjacking—which recently evolved into Timbersports, a competition founded and sponsored by the company Stihl, which manufactures lumberjacking tools—has become an international phenomenon with competitors from around the world trying to set the fastest time in cutting lumber. Its culture is that of competition, not of brutish North American men working hard for a day’s pay. Though still acquainted with the forest, lumberjacking lives on independently away from the modern crews of loggers.

Every year, the Ohio Forestry Association puts on the Paul Bunyan Show at the Guernsey County Fairgrounds. Gathered from all parts of the country, exhibitors show off the latest and greatest gadgets of the logging industry to about 5,000 patrons.

It’s a wild event. The sounds of chainsaws echo around flannel-garbed attendees. When one goes off, another starts up. Men haggling over prices provide a constant background murmur. Lurking in the air, the smells of wood chips, grease and diesel fuel fuse together. Children play in giant piles of tree scraps left over from heated wood chippers. Amish in mom-style ensembles watch representatives from the Stihl, Husqvarna and Dolmar chainsaw companies cut logs with their respective brands.

Grown men in aviators and baseball caps control their excitement as they pick up the newest, loudest wood chopping equipment.

It’s a festival unlike many, and all of it is watched over by a giant wooden statue of Paul Bunyan and his blue ox, Babe.

There are few axes scattered about the fairgrounds—competition brings in the only ones. Each lumberjack carries multiple axes, each sharpened a different way to get the best whack.
through specific types of woods and grains. Some axes are best for hardwood, others for softer wood. It takes years of experience to be able to sharpen an ax to meet the right type of wood for an event.

Matt Cogar arrives with his father, Paul Cogar, another lumberjack. There he greets Arden Cogar Jr., his father’s cousin, and Kristy Cogar, Arden’s wife, who are both lumberjacks. All four Cogars plan on competing in the international events. To say that lumberjacking is in the Cogars’ blood is an understatement. Matt is descended from a long line of timber-felling men and women. Arden counts four uncles, 15 cousins, his father, his grandfather and now his daughters as competitors in lumberjacking.

“My lumberjacking skills are my passion. It is the passion that is keeping me in good physical shape… It is something that will be in my blood and in my family for many generations,” Arden says.

His grandfather started competing as a lumberjack in the 1920s after selling in the forests. Back then, lumberjack competitions happened in the woods between loggers. Arden’s father followed his own father, becoming a lumberjack competitor in 1959. Now it continues in Arden and his offspring.

Arden has been practicing chopping wood for 32 of his 40 years. He has won 46 different lumberjack-}

ing competitions around the world including the U.S. Stihl Timbersports Championship three times out of the last five years. In the 2010 series, he was the captain of the U.S. National Lumberjack team.

His frame shows it. Arden, a resident of West Virginia by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health shows that injuries were reduced by 36 percent with the introduction of the feller buncher, a motorized harvester capable of cutting through the base of trees and placing them into stacks.

Gone are the days of lumberjack camps and working in the woods with axes and saws. Modern as men and women carry chainsaws and cut down the trees that are too big for machinery.

Jeff Pelleiter, one of the many brothers featured in American Loggers on the Discovery Channel, sees many of the older industry standards disappearing as computerization takes over the logging process.

“The processors are all computerized. The cutting and trimming is done by machinery. Everything is high-tech. There are no more ribbons to mark trees,” he says.

Jeff started in the business when he was 16 years old. It was the early 1980s and machinery was scarce. Crowds of chainsaw-equipped lumberjacks cut down trees that were marked for trimming and shipment. As technological innovation continues, dangerous tools...
such as chainsaws are being seen less and less.

"We stay away from chainsaws. Worker's comp killed us," Jeff says. As a result, those age-old lumberjacking skills honed in the forest by logging industry workers are disappearing and being replaced by technological know-how. Because of the changing industry, a smaller number of people need to accumulate these skills.

The U.S. logging industry has been on a downturn for the last decade. In 1998, according to the U.S. Census Bureau of Labor Statistics, it consisted of 14,254 logging companies employing 84,170 loggers. By 2008, the industry had shrunk to 9,741 companies employing 61,911 loggers.

Ohio has seen the same sort of trend with 158 logging companies in 1998 dropping down to 50 by 2008. Most of the remaining logging companies operate in Southeast Ohio, where most of the state's forested landscape remains.

As the industry evolves and shrinks, the number of lumberjack competitors in the U.S. and abroad continues to grow. People are still impressed by strong men and women felling trees. Making civilization out of nature is part of the American persona. George Washington wielded a hatchet in his youth, scything down a cherry tree to test his new blade. William Henry Harrison, Ohio native and ninth U.S. president, ran for office with an ax in his hand as a frontiersman who drank hard cider. The 16th president, Abraham Lincoln, was known as the 'rail-splitter.' The ax became a symbol of the working frontiersman, a man of expansion and progress who conquered the West. Lumberjacking is a part of American lore. The interest still drives with reality shows, such as 'Men on the History Channel and American Loggers' on the Discovery Channel, which both follow the forest industry and its workers. That interest has now manifested itself toward lumberjack sports and competition.

Jim and Derek Dushimire, father and son from Newark, began lumberjacking after a comment Derek made at the Paul Bunyan Show about 20 years ago.

"When Derek was small, I remember at the Paul Bunyan Show when it was in Nelsonville and ESPN was there, and he turned to me and said, 'You know that I think we could do this.' I thought, 'Well, a father and son thing—it would be fun to try.' So, we got an old double-bitted ax and started throwing,' Jim says.

The Dushimires had no background in lumberjacking before picking up the sport. Jim is a retired science teacher and Derek works as a building manager at Chiller Ice Rinks in Columbus.

Jim, 64, swings his ax with experience. Wearing a blue Husqvarna sweater and orange Wright Brothers hat, a peak of gray hair emphasizes his many years with the throwing ax. Derek, 33 and soft-spoken, wields the ax with a tall and lanky frame.

Together, the father and son pair possesses a number of Ohio titles and a few World titles in a number of different lumberjack events. The two may not be at the Cogars' level, only training a few times a week, but they can still make a dent in local competitions.

Not every lumberjack can be professional, but the Dushimires prove that lumberjacking could be approached by just about anyone who wants to chop some wood. To get more people like the Dushimires to join, Still has increased visibility of the sport by showing competitions as a series on ESPN since 1995.

The Stihl Timbersports Series has spread lumberjack competitions to viewers across the nation. Every year, roughly 400,000 viewers watch burly men cut through white pine with their various tools. In fact, the Stihl Timbersports Series has been the longest-running ESPN show besides SportsCenter.

"We don't see it slowing down. The tradition and history have kept [lumberjacking] alive, but now we've been able to spread viewership and give the sport a real push forward," says Brad Sorgen, Stihl's event marketing specialist.

Stihl has been pushing collegiate competition as well. The Stihl Timbersports Collegiate Series consists of around 60 U.S. colleges participating in five different regional competitions. With an average of 20 people per team, there are roughly 1,200 college lumberjacks competing across the nation to earn a title to participate with international competitors. The last winner was
Logan Scarborough of North Carolina State University, who was able to compete in Austria. These students usually study forestry, natural resource management or some outdoor program and stumble into lumberjack- ing after becoming involved in the local forestry club.

"Right now, there [are] a lot of younger people coming into the sport, so hopefully by the time I get older, there will be more people involved and it can still carry on," Matt says. "I will do everything I can to help the younger competition keep going, even though I'm young as hell. I'll help everyone as much as I can."

Recently, groups of younger lumberjacks from Europe have started appearing on the international circuit. At the Paul Bunyan Show, three Dutchmen came to compete. Among them was Rik van Drielen, a 33-year-old chainsaw technician who works out of Schil Holland. Rik picked up the sport in 2001 after his friend, a world champion in logging, brought him to a Stihl Timbersports competition.

"He took me, I saw it and I said, 'I want to do that. It's very cool,'" Rik says. A true Dutchman complete with wooden shoes and a Scandinavian accent, Rik is a three-time champion of the Benelux, a competition with athletes from Belgium, Netherlands and Luxembourg.

In recent years, foreign competitors have dominated the sport. In fact, the winners of the last 14 world championships have been competitors primarily from New Zealand. Jason Wyszyk, a New Zealand native, holds two of the six world records for the Stihl Timbersports disciplines and is the reigning series champion.

These foreign competitors are garnering overseas interest. So far, a total of 132 countries watch Stihl Timbersports on television, with 50 of those countries hosting their own lumberjack events. In the last world championship in 2010, 21 countries sent lumberjack representatives to compete.

"Europeans are starting to catch on. They're a younger generation, too. So, it's looking good," Matt says.

As the Paul Bunyan Show ends, the lumberjack competitors start to disperse. The Dutchmen are returning to New York and the Cooper clan to West Virginia. Rik is going to spend some time touring Ohio before spending another two days getting back to his home turf.

Some competitors fared better than others—Derek ended up winning the ax throw against Mel Leutz, "the king of lumberjacks," who also happens to teach and coach Matt. Arden and his wife, Krissy, failed to take a title. Rik and his Dutch team impressed the crowd with the roar of their rotary engine chainsaw, but did little else in terms of placement. Matt, on the other hand, won first place for four out of the seven competitions, taking home the trophy for the standing chop, the underhand chop, the double buck saw and springboard events. However, he wasn't nearly as successful in his other events.

The future looks bright for Matt Cooper. At 23, he has many years to perfect those weak events, and with a teacher such as Mel, he could be the American to finally beat the New Zealand competitors. He doesn't have to worry about the degradation of his sport, either, as the number of lumberjack competitions and competitors are growing. The only thing he may have to worry about is the disappearance of the culture. International lumberjack competitions may be giving new life to an aging sport, but the original scenes of burly men besting others in games of tree-felling may dissolve into the clear, crisp chips of standard white pine, the wood of competition.