

Logger Sports – Marketing the Forest Industry

By Pieta Woolley



Photo: Sean Perry

Bob Marquis is showing off his latest “toy,” bought from a retired logger in Oregon, preparing it for its Canadian debut this summer. It’s a 1962 Buick V8 engine attached to a three-foot chainsaw bar, with “LOGGERS” painted on the side in bright yellow. Two burly men can lift the 500-pound tool and saw through just about anything. When the logger and road builder fire it up, it sounds like a helicopter.

The machine is a showpiece for Powell River Logger Sports—an attraction to add vim to the recently revitalized show. The saw is goofy. And it’s powerful. Just like Marquis, a long-time Logger Sports World Champion in underhand chopping, power saw events and double-buck. Marquis started in the 1970’s, competed in Germany, France, England, Australia, New Zealand and across the US and Canada, as well as running the local show.

“The reason there’s small towns all up and down the coast is because of the forest industry,” Marquis said, explaining why he believes in logger sports strongly enough to pour hundreds of hours into the local show each year. His son Brett is the fourth generation of Marquis to harvest BC timber. His late brother Bill is the only Marquis to have died in the woods. Logging culture is in his blood and bones.

“For an industry to have the skills we had in the past, in the era of the hand fallers, and carrying that forward into logger sports competitions which have been going on for more than a hundred years in this province, is about celebrating who we are. Our pride. Our heritage.”

With so much heart and affection for his peers and the forest, he is exactly the kind of guy you’d expect at the helm of one of BC’s most successful Logger Sports shows. But unlike events of the past, today’s shows held in Port McNeill,

Sandspit, Squamish, Campbell River, Port Alberni and elsewhere—have a crucial job to do, beyond showcasing workers’ skills.

As an ambassador for the culture and history of logging in this province, logger sports is helping newbies and urbanites connect to a sometimes invisible and un-

fathomable industry—helping, in other words, to make peace in the woods.

Two summers ago, when Marquis helped revitalize Powell River’s games and attracted both Canadian and World Championship competitions, 10,000 people showed up—mostly locals, and largely, people without any direct link to



Photo: Sherril Wiebe



the woods. They watched cross-cut sawing, pole climbing, springboard chopping and more; they ate smokies and sat next to each other in the new Loggers Memorial Bowl, a permanent amphitheater newly built into the grassy hill at the downtown beach. For many, it was the first time they'd seen men and women in high-viz vests working with wood.

"Why do we keep doing these things?" asked Marquis, acknowledging that put-

ting on a show is "a hell of a lot of work." He does it "to see the smiles on the faces of the people who come. To foster that sense of camaraderie and friendship."

For the province, though, the logger sports story is greater than simply smiles. This year, 2018, marks an exciting new resurgence in the sport that was, in some places, slipping away. The renewed popularity of BC's official industry sport—proclaimed so by the provincial

government in 1971—is an opportunity to open doors both with forestry skeptics and with the world.

Perhaps no one understands the value and contemporary power of Logger Sports better than Ben Lefler, The Laughing Logger. In Vancouver since 2016, the former New Zealand banker organizes travelling events which include the entertainment show Lumberjack Evolution; BattleAxe, a portable axe-throwing facility; KidZone, which trains children in Logger Sports, and more.

Lefler argued there's nothing as effective as Logger Sports to teach residents and tourists about working in the woods.

"It's so important that logger sports are not lost and that it's brought back into the main centres," Lefler said. "You don't have to be a logger to feel it. We all live in timber frame homes, so we are all part of this industry. I think there are great opportunities to mitigate the perception of those old logger practices of the past—this sport is a great way to do that. It draws the eye, it's dynamic and explosive. It's just a great communication platform."

Furthermore, audiences love it. "We're off the charts," he explained, noting that he's booked through summer 2018.

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At universities and colleges, logger sports are helping to generate interest in working in the woods among a new generation of young people. Lefler also coaches the recently revived UBC Logger Sports team. In January, the university hosted the Great Canadian Classic, with teams from BCIT, SFU, VIU, University of Montana and University of Idaho. UBC took the PanAm Trophy. The team practises in a newly-built facility at UBC farm, adjacent to a Musqueam cultural teaching facility and agriculture research.

Finally, in the category of “only in Vancouver,” Lefler will bring Logger Sports back to the PNE this fall as part of a large fitness conference. Attendees will be invited to enhance their core strength on cross-cut saws and belay up a pole to “feel the thrill of Logger Sports passion and culture.”

Lefler isn't the only one who has noticed the surging appetite for logging culture. Young urbanites are surprisingly riveted by logger sports, reports champion chopper Kat Spencer. Back in Edmonton, she helped start an indoor axe-throwing facility that lets office workers try a core Logger Sport. It's now bringing in \$1 million a year and three

more facilities have opened in Edmonton, plus one in Kelowna.

“I guarantee that people who say they don't like cutting down trees are going to these facilities,” said Spencer, who manages a tree seed orchard in Salmon Arm. “There's a huge younger demographic in their 20's and 30's who want to connect with something primitive. You throw the axe and it sticks in the target. Honestly, it just feels great.”

As a member of the Maine-based Axe Women show, which travels throughout North America, she's noticed that audiences more engaged with the sport than ever. “There's a cultural shift,” said the woman who founded the Alberta Forestry History Association. “History. Is. Sexy.”

Gerry Burch certainly hopes so. In the early 1980s, the now-retired RPF helped Bill Moore—arguably BC's most accomplished Logger Sports promoter—plans for a forestry education centre in the Lower Mainland. It was part of Moore's larger vision to educate city dwellers about the forest sector; other initiatives included bringing Logger Sports to the PNE and starting the Festival of Forestry, which immerses school teachers

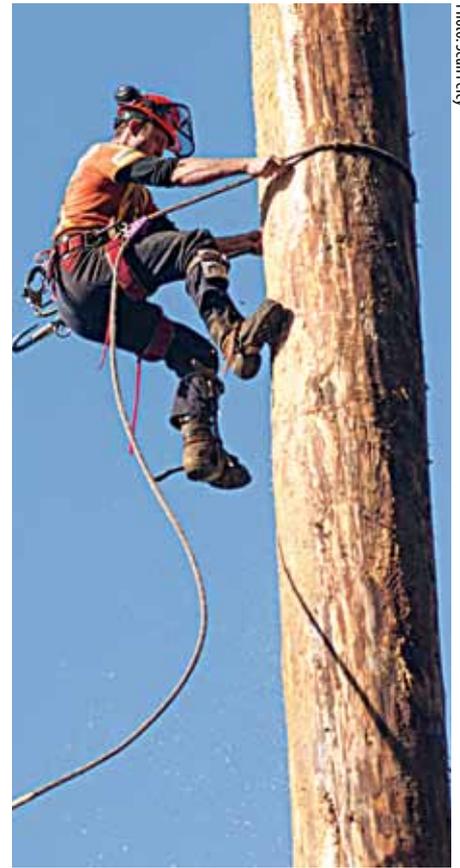


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in forestry for a few days, to help them understand the sector and communicate

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it back to their students. The forestry education centre got lost when the bottom fell out of the industry in 1984. But Burch, who lives on Vancouver's West side, argued that the need for urban education has never been more acute.

"It's always been an uphill battle to get people to understand the industry," said Burch, who originated the Forest History Association of BC—which in March held its 20th annual general meeting. "I call it 'the silent profession.' It's like pulling teeth to get loggers involved in public relations locally or provincially."

Up in Squamish this year, that old dream of a forestry education centre may be coming to fruition just down the road from that community's historic logger sports grounds. Eric Anderson, a lifelong chokerman, is a director of the Sea to Sky Forestry Centre, which started a capital campaign this Spring. Teaching the community's many tourists—and locals—about the significance of Logger Sports is just good business sense, Anderson said.

"Logger Sports is a neglected opportunity. When Canada was entering the Japanese market in the 1960's and 70's, they saw Logger Sports as part of the branding they could bring to Japan. It is, like Canada, a forestry country and so it became part of the marketing efforts. The best showcase was the Osaka World Fair in 1970. There were these giant Douglas-fir flares next to the Logger Sports arena. Everyone went to Japan and performed. In Squamish, we had Japanese exchange competitors all through that era because of it."

Now, Anderson says, Canada has the opportunity to bring that same friendly Logger Sports branding to China—which is not a forestry culture—to help build a respect there for responsible forest management.

For loggers, though, the games are simply about family, and pride, and heritage. This summer, Marquis' son Brett will defend his three Canadian Championship titles on the CANLOG circuit, in small cities across BC, continuing his family's legacy. That's still the heart of Logger Sports—people who work in the woods showing their neighbours their exemplary skills.

"We show people what we do and why," said Marquis Sr. "That's it."



Rural pride surges again: Logger Sports in the 21st century

- Since the beginning of logging, bored loggers tested their skills against each other as entertainment.
- 1890s: Logger Sports appears at BC's Big Lower Mainland Agricultural Fairs.
- 1930s: Community Logger Sports shows are first established in Sooke, Squamish and elsewhere. Many more emerge over the next decades.
- 1966: The PNE hosts Logger Sports for the first time. Thanks to industry enthusiast Bill Moore, it's a pillar of BC's biggest urban exhibition for decades. The Festival of Forestry begins in this era, too.
- 1969: Canadian Logger Sports Association is incorporated. CAN-LOG sets sports standards so that championships can be decided.
- 1970: Osaka World Fair Logger Sports is part of the Canada Pavilion. Competitors come from around the world.
- 1970s: The Wickheim brothers brought their travelling show to Tokyo, as well as offering long-time shows at SeaWorld and the CNE. Peter Holmquist brings the sport to Sweden. University teams are going strong, as are community festivals. BC's competitors are on the podium around the world.
- 1971: BC's Legislature proclaims Logger Sports as the Province's Official Industry Sport.
- 1986: Logger Sports at Expo 86. One of the most popular pavilions, and a symbol for British Columbia.
- Early 2000s: Some Logger Sports are in decline due mostly to the originators retiring. Powell River, Sooke, Duncan and others lose their long-time shows.
- 2010s: Resurgence University teams are back and competing internationally; TLA sponsors shows in Port McNeill, Powell River, Sandspit, Squamish, Campbell River and Port Alberni; entertainment shows are bringing the sport to Asia and around North America; a capital campaign for a Logger Sports education centre is in the works for Squamish; women outnumber men in chopping for the first time in Western Canadian championships, and much, much more.▲