

## ***Old School Vs. New School***

Amazing changes have come by way of the integration of rock climbing and repelling technology that have made tree care at least more interesting for climbers. The question is: have these changes made climbing “Safer, easier and more efficient?” Are we really more productive?

**Old school** for the purpose of this article will refer to older style gear butt strap saddle, snaps, ropes without eye splices, taught line hitch, no split tails and body thrust method of ascent. **New school** will refer to leg strap saddles, blake hitch, split tail, carabiners, eye spliced ropes, secured footlock, throw lines, slack tenders, friction savers. With the exceptions of ascenders and half a dozen other innovations, these are the notable advancements.

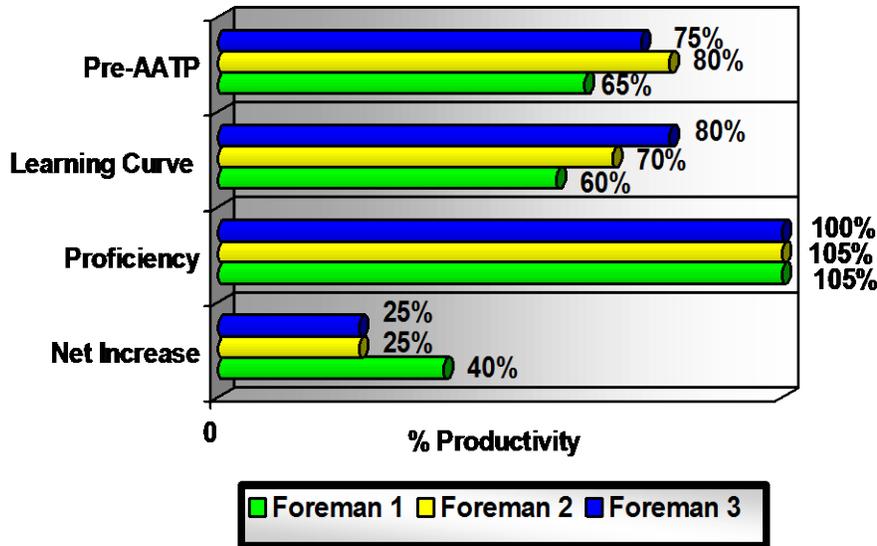
Since 1997 I’ve been putting the new school to a variety of tests and practice exercises to gain proficiency. With a good working knowledge and several years climbing with these techniques, I have come to a conclusion. New school good, Old school still good just harder, and less efficient. *Safer* is open to debate without comparative numbers directed to these exact differences. But, I can say that less fatigue equals safer. Many accidents can be attributed to tired climbers. Fatigue can cloud judgement and cause people to look for short cuts.

However, more gear means more entropy. First of all Entropy is a law of the universe wherein all things move toward disorder, and secondly the more complicated a system, the more energy it takes to maintain order. Entropy is the way your shop becomes a disaster area unless you keep after it. So by adding hardware do we not get: Safer, Easier, more Entropy? - Not necessarily. The key here is training in gear management, and being professionally driven to master the techniques. In short, more gear does not equal more entropy if you know how and when to use them.

ArborMaster training has contributed enormously to the development of training in the new school. Their influence has invigorated this industry and added excitement in the climbing community. Even an old school company like Davey has embraced these advancements. I took level 1-4 from ArborMaster and gained a great deal of respect for the new school. I got so much out of it that we began Davey’s Advanced Arborist Training Program - which is modeled after ArborMaster Training.

We took three experienced climbers ages 25-40 whose productivity we had been tracking for 2 years which established a baseline. We then put them through the Advanced Arborist Training Program at Davey. For three months roughly, their productivity dropped by ten percent on average with one exception. This 10% drop is the learning curve, and should be expected. After which, each person gained an average of 30% in productivity over the baseline. See graph.

These three foremen were considered some of the best old school foremen in the business, and certainly among the best at Davey. We realized after the training a 30% increase in productivity. Before this training, they were effectively operating at 75% of their potential. Remember that these are some of our best, and they are dedicated to mastery of techniques, not every foreman will excel to this degree.



What we see was a change in how they approached the tree, conducted job briefings and a host of other differences in how they go about their work. For example: Establishing a tie-in point higher in trees to begin a climb which is *more efficient*, rather than body thrusting up to the second limb. Using blocks for false crotches instead of natural crotches for rigging. This isn't faster than a natural crotch, but more consistent and *easier* to tie off pieces.

The parts of the training which are hardest to quantify are the improved training skills of the participants, and the improvements in attitude and professionalism. Each of these individual productivity improvements are based on crew production managed by each foreman. The increase in their training ability has had an effect, but that's hard to put a number on. If you'd like to contact these foremen yourself, forget about it. I can tell you who they are, but I won't. Besides, they're very busy.

In the end, it's not the gadgets that increase productivity; rather it is the training and attention to the task that made our people more efficient. You might think this article would end with an endorsement of every kind of hardware available but it can't. Only a small increase in speed can be attributed to the hardware.

About 50% of the course focuses on safer chainsaw operation, reduced down time with the saws, more accurate felling and more teachable techniques. 25% focuses on climbing techniques including new gear. 25% on safety, job briefings, and predicting the reactive forces before beginning a job. The gear itself doesn't increase speed on a job site more than 5% of the whole. So why do we have the new school gear? Simple, the new school gear makes it *easier*, and *more efficient* which in turn reduces fatigue thereby making us *safer*. *Safer, Easier, more Efficient*.

In my 13 years of old school and 4 years of new school, I can honestly say that climbing has become easier. Having more tools for the task has made me more efficient, and since I only climb occasionally now fatigue is a bigger issue than I'd like to admit. However, I am less fatigued as a result of these innovations, which can only be safer. As with any change in the way we work, it takes time to grasp all of the elements.

There is no reason to leave the old school behind if the new school isn't safer, or at least as safe. Certain elements like secured footlock create risk that does not exist with body thrust, but the ease of entry into a tree reduces fatigue to such a degree that it becomes safer for those who learn it the right way.

Tim Jackson, Manger of National Recruiting and trainer for The Davey Tree Expert Company