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## At this 'Olympics,' a front-row seat is free

By Susan Weiner

Let others flock to TV coverage of sports. I've got my nose pressed against a different screen - the screen in my door. I'm watching the "Squirrel Olympics" in my backyard.

My husband and I regularly welcome squirrels into our yard with a tray of sunflower seeds and corncobs coated with peanut butter. In return, our feathery-tailed friends entertain us with athletic exploits. A chunky squirrel runs atop a tall wooden garden fence as relaxed as if she were a parasol-toting lady strolling along a beachside boardwalk. Maybe I'd do that, too, if I had a fluffy tail to help me balance.

To raise the degree of difficulty, she'll leap onto moving surfaces, such as the thinnest branches of our Norway maple. She sways with the wind while nibbling on the seedpods. I thank her silently; there will be fewer mini-maples for me to pluck from my flower beds.

Out of the corner of my eye, I catch another squirrel on the uneven bars. He swings from one branch to another with a seemingly careless lack of concern. He makes the long jump from maple tree to garage roof without the long preparatory run of a human athlete. Some people call them "tree rats," saying they look like rats with tails. I use the term affectionately, admiring their grace and tenacity in pursuit of food.

My favorite competition takes place on an unusual apparatus. Squirrels will engage in all sorts of antics to reach a fresh ear of corn dangling from a wire and bungee cord contraption suspended from a shepherd's hook planted in the ground. They don't care if they look silly getting there.

How do they reach the corn that's tantalizingly above their grasp as they sit or even stand on the ground below?

I've identified several basic techniques. First, there's the lateral mount of the shepherd's hook. When I see an arborvitae branch swaying in the hedge near the top of the hook, I know it hides a squirrel calculating the angle and distance to a perch atop the hook. Squirrels' innate sense of balance - and their ability to rotate their feet 180 degrees at their ankles - mean that most of them land safely.

Squirrels move quickly toward their goal once they reach the hook. One that I call "the fisherman" uses a hand over hand - or should I say "paw over paw"? - technique to reel the corn toward his mouth. He looks like a rickety weather vane perched atop a long pole. The "question mark" squirrel hangs upside down by its feet from the horizontal arm of the hook. Her tail wraps daintily around that arm to steady her as she chomps energetically on the corn.

"The leaper" falls off the hook as she grabs the cob, but keeps hold of the cob and eats as she swings. The "fireman wannabe" slides down the pole, reaching out energetically toward the dangling delicacy, but hits bottom empty-handed. A variation is "the climber." She scrambles up the pole, but is equally inept at her sideways reach.

For those who eschew the lateral mount, there's the direct attack. The "upward jumper" launches herself skyward with her powerful legs, driving her claws into the corn like pins into a pincushion. Then she wraps her legs around the corn to stabilize herself and chews away. She looks so happy, like a baby with a bottle.

A whole ear of corn is too much for one squirrel, so they take turns going at it. I enjoy watching the parade of competitors.

While the Summer Olympics come but once every four years, the "Squirrel Olympics" keep on going until I run

out of corn. Or until a greedy, but nimble competitor pulls the cob off the wire and scampers with it into the bushes.

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