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Andrew East and Shawn Johnson East sit for a portrait at their home in Nashville on Sept. 3. NICOLE HESTER/THE TENNESSEAN

TOUGHER TOGETHER

SHAWN AND ANDREW EAST STRENGTHEN MARRIAGE ON 'SPECIAL FORCES'



Bryan West
Nashville
Tennessean
USA TODAY
NETWORK —
TENN.

Forget dinner and a movie, Shawn Johnson East and Andrew East tested their bond by crawling through mud and jumping out of helicopters on "Special Forces: World's Toughest Test." • "I think it strengthened our marriage just because we got to do something surreal together," said Johnson East, a former Olympic gymnast. "We both got to see each other struggle and kind of persevere and go through a bunch of really hard things individually." • "Special Forces: World's Toughest Test" is a reality series that immerses celebrities in a rigorous military training environment. Contestants endure physically demanding challenges, including navigating harsh terrain, sleeping on cots and consuming basic meal packets to simulate survival scenarios. The Easts are a part of season four, which airs Sept. 25 at 8 p.m. CT on Fox. • Andrew East, a former pro football player, agreed the show was as tough mentally as it was physically. • "It was absolutely terrifying," he said. "It is nonstop action. There's this underlying stress that you're feeling, and then you compound that with being miked up 24/7. It's like you're always on edge." **See SPECIAL, Page 5C**



Andrew East and Shawn Johnson East on Special Forces Season 4. PHOTOS PROVIDED BY FOX CORPORATION



Special

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For Johnson East, the show had been a long time coming.

"I was asked to do 'Special Forces' the very first season," she said. "It's right up our alley. We love jumping out of helicopters. We work with the military a lot. We would pay to do that. But every season they asked, I was either pregnant or postpartum. So when they came back around, they offered again and I was like, 'I just don't know, like leaving our kids. ...' And they came back and they said, 'How about both of you?'"

That sealed it.

"We love a physical challenge," she said. "We love a mental challenge. We always want to see how far we can push ourselves. It was kind of a challenge to ourselves to see how can we showcase our marriage and the love of that and see how well we can do on this crazy show."

Shawn Johnson East

ery single morning."

Once the kids are off, the couple clocks in for their second full-time job: creating content for millions of online followers.

"We'll work and do content and try to capture what marriage life looks like and have fun with it and share it with the platform that we've been given," Johnson East said.

Recently, she balanced on a large tower of Jenga blocks for the Nicki Minaj challenge, admitting that, as a professional baller, the task was nerve-wracking.

"Half of the ideas that we come up with and present to each other are probably very bad ideas," she said. "We've done a lot of fitness challenges that have gone very wrong. I'm surprised we haven't had more concussions and stuff."

Andrew East is often the creative engine behind the ideas.

"She's very patient with me and I love making videos," he said. "I love telling stories, and I think it's so fun that we get to do it full-time as a job. I'll throw out a lot of ideas. She filters through them and chooses which one she wants to go with. I think last year we put around 700 videos out, and so crazy. We stay busy, but it's a fun job to have."

Rooted in real life, Nashville

The couple's social media presence has grown into one of Music City's biggest. Tennessean readers crowned the former Johnson East "Nashville's Top Influencer" with tens of thousands of votes.

The couple's key ingredient is showing their authentic selves rather than polished, airbrushed versions of their life.

"Our main objective is to always be real," Johnson East said. "Our life is far from perfect. It's messy and hard. Marriage is hard. Parenting is hard. We actually want it to be a two-way street where we get to have conversations with people and relate to them and actually share in the same life hardships that everybody goes through on a day-to-day basis."

For Andrew East, storytelling has been a winding path that started far from influencer culture.

"This was never in the playbook here," the former NFL player said. "I studied civil engineering at Vanderbilt thinking I was gonna build wells somewhere. Then I went to business school not knowing what I was gonna do. When I got picked up by the (Kansas City) Chiefs, I thought maybe I'll play football for 15 years. But then that didn't pan out and after three months I got cut. I rediscovered my love of editing videos and filming videos and that was back in 2015 and we've been doing it ever since."

Even as their careers take them onto national stages, Johnson East said their family's roots remain firmly planted in Tennessee.

"I love everything about Nashville," she said. "It's a very large city, but it feels so small, and I feel like everyone knows everyone, and everyone's connected but in such a beautiful way. It's such a supportive community. Everyone's striving to fulfill their dreams, but it's family-focused and kid-focused. Even at our kids' school, we've met such amazing people. It just feels like home."

Andrew East added: "We've been here 15 years and have loved it more and more every year. It just feels like a city that has its priorities correct. We're glad to be here and we plan to stick around."



Andrew East and Shawn Johnson East are featured on Season 4 of "Special Forces: World's Toughest Test," which airs Sept. 25 on Fox. PHOTOS BY NICOLE HESTER/THE TENNESSEAN