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John Folwell, '16 Earns all 141 Boy Scout Merit Badges



Congratulations to senior John Folwell, who earned all 141 Boy Scouts of America merit badges! Below is a story from the Rochester Democrat and Chronicle about this special accomplishment.

Now, with the rare accomplishment complete and all 141 Boy Scouts of America merit badges in hand (and on a sash), John Folwell IV can fondly look back at the 50-mile bike ride that almost derailed his efforts when he was only 12.

Folwell, an 18-year-old senior at McQuaid Jesuit High School, has wrapped up securing all 141 merit badges that were available during his six-plus years as a Scout, including four that were available for only a year.

"This is the first young man that I've had that's done all of them," said Stephen Hoitt, the Scout executive of the Rochester-region Seneca Waterways Council of Boy Scouts of America. Hoitt has worked with the Boy Scouts for 24 years in six different regions.

Said Folwell, "I didn't want to leave Scouting knowing that I had not done it to its fullest."

He discovered early on how challenging some merit badges might be. Folwell had not been riding a bike long when he decided to get the merit badge for cycling. It required two 25-mile trips and a 50-miler. Living in Fairport, he and his father, John Folwell III, decided to ride the Erie Canal from their home to a relative's home in Gates, then return.

On the way to Gates, he got a flat and did not have a pump handy.

Someone else biking on the canal did, and the father-son Folwell team

pumped up the tire and then continued on their way as the helpers, told of the pursuit of the badge, cheered.

The Folwells reached Gates, and watched part of a Bills game (the team lost), as John IV's mother, Tina, brought them a pump for the return trip — which happened to be into the wind.

"I remember as we were going and pedaling and feeling like I was going nowhere," he said.

They reached Fairport after traveling a little under 50 miles, went farther alongside the canal, turned back, then reached their home at 49.9 miles. They biked a bit farther, with a fear that they would not complete the ride in the required time of eight hours.

Instead, Folwell said, they were done in seven hours and 57 minutes.

That badge is simply one of the 141, but, like all of the others, Folwell has a story that accompanies it. Point to any badge on the front and back of the sash (he has consolidated the badges from two sashes to one) and he remembers distinctly just what the achievement required.

There's the Public Speaking badge, for which he made a presentation to others about galaxies, while thinking, "I don't know how I'm going to do this. I've never really spoken before people before."

There's the Theater badge, which required him to perform in a drama. Large for his age at 12, he tried out for the school musical Oklahoma and ended up with the major role of the villain, Jud Fry.

Or the Backpacking badge, completed at the Philmont Scout Ranch in New Mexico, that was particularly challenging for Scouts from the Northeast unaccustomed to the arid climate.

For 2010, the Boy Scouts issued four merit badges available only for that centennial year. The badges were not available until spring, shortening the time frame to complete them.

Folwell recalls how he had the final one to complete — signaling — over his Christmas holiday break. It required creating a telegraph for Morse code, and knowing how to use flags for the semaphore code.

That badge was the toughest of the four, Folwell said, and "I just wanted a break" over the holiday.

Instead, he wrapped up the challenge at a Scoutmaster's home on Dec. 30.

"I thought, 'I can only do this once, and I think I'll really regret this if I don't get this done,' " Folwell said. "I pushed through and was able to get it done."

There is no formal accounting of how many Boy Scouts have secured all merit badges. One website has informally compiled a list and the total now stands at 270.

"It's pretty much the equivalent of seeing a no-hitter in baseball," Hoitt said.

Asked about the achievement, a communications representative with the Boy Scouts of America replied, "While the Boy Scouts of America does not track statistics on the number of Scouts who earn all available merit badges, neither per year nor in total, it is certainly an extremely rare achievement and we congratulate this young man on this amazing accomplishment in Scouting."

Folwell, no longer a Scout now that he has turned 18, was a member of Troop 31. His father is a Scoutmaster. To Folwell, the badges themselves are simply the physical manifestation of what he did, what he learned, and what he is sure to carry into the future. (He is now in the college search phase of high school.)

"I didn't want to think to myself, 'Why didn't I do it then?'"

"I didn't want to leave a stone unturned."

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Photo courtesy of the Democrat and Chronicle

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