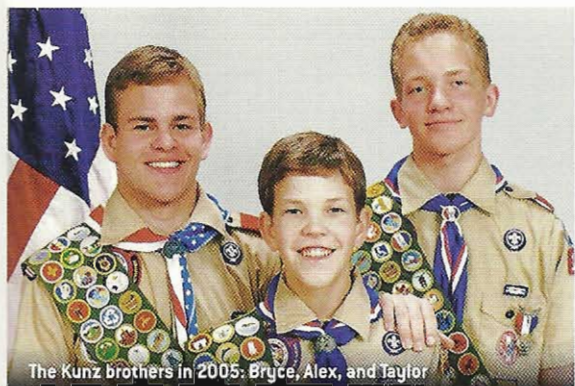


Collecting the Whole Set

How three brothers earned every merit badge in the book

by Mark Ray



"The thing I learned from Scouting and earning all those merit badges was that it takes time and diligence to reach your goals."

—Bryce Kunz

Born at two-year intervals two decades ago, Bryce, Taylor, and Alex Kunz of San Diego are, like most brothers, highly competitive. So when Bryce, who's now 22 years old, decided to earn every merit badge, it was no surprise that Taylor and Alex would decide to do the same thing—and then some.

"Taylor would tell Bryce, 'Anything you can do, I can do better,'" their mom, Nancy, recalled. "And Alex would say, 'Well, it doesn't matter because whatever you do, I'm going to do more.'"

In the end, they all succeeded, and Alex's boast proved to be true. While Bryce and Taylor earned 121 and 122 badges respectively—the number of available badges fluctuates from time to time—Alex earned a whopping 129, including four historic badges that were brought back just for this year's 100th Anniversary Celebration.

That's not to say Alex was happy when he heard those retro badges were coming out this spring, along with Scuba Diving (which appeared in December) and Scouting Heritage (which debuted in April).

"I was like, 'Really? I'm this close,'" he recalled. "That was hard."

Hitting a moving target was not the only challenge Alex and his brothers faced—or their parents, for that matter. But more on that in a moment.

The boys' father, Ron, is an Eagle Scout who earned 69 merit badges. (That's more than double what most Scouts earn but one

less than the 70 his younger brother, Vernon, received.) But it wasn't their dad's accomplishment that started the Kunz boys on their quest. Instead, it was a Scout Bryce encountered when he was just 11 years old.

"He saw a Scout who had a sash with lots of the merit badges on it," Nancy recalled. "He thought that was so exciting."

That encounter planted a seed with Bryce that grew as he advanced in Scouting. "I decided to earn all the merit badges, I think, just as I continued to earn them and thought to myself, 'Well, if I am this close, why not?'" Bryce said.

One good reason could have been that Bryce only has one hand, which makes skills such as rock climbing and canoeing difficult. In fact, the first time Bryce showed up to work on his Canoeing merit badge at summer camp, he was turned away. "They put him in a different class, which was fine because he got to earn merit badges," Nancy said. (Needless to say, Bryce went on to earn the Canoeing merit badge before his Scouting career ended.)

Since the brothers are so close in age, they worked on many of the merit badges together. In fact, advancement became a family project. The family met almost every Sunday night to plot the week's badge work, and family vacations were sometimes built around merit badges. That meant that the three Kunz sisters got to tag along on ski trips and other fun activities, as well as traipse around museums and historic sites.

While each Scout struggled with certain badges, he made real connections with others. Bryce still enjoys canoeing and climbing, and Taylor plans to continue mountain biking "until I am in a wheelchair." Alex, meanwhile, really enjoyed learning about Scouting's founders in the Scouting Heritage merit badge.

More importantly, however, each brother learned some life lessons that go far beyond specific badge requirements. "The thing I learned from Scouting and earning all those merit badges was that it takes time and diligence to reach your goals," Bryce said. "I am a communications major at Brigham Young University and feel that my involvement in the merit badge program and working with so many people over the years has really provided me with a great experience and with skills that I use every day."

One skill the brothers didn't learn along the way was sewing. Their mom was the one who had to sew their merit badges—all 372 of them—on their sashes. She sewed some on twice. "If I got them upside down or out of line, they would make me redo them," she said.

"I think she might be the first to recommend a sewing merit badge!" Bryce said. "And she would be justified."

Justified—and justifiably proud.