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A Greenville teen earned 139 Boys Scouts merit badges from scuba diving in Key West to whitewater rafting



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GREENVILLE – It turns out, 139 merit badges don't fit on a single sash. At least, that was the case for Eagle Scout Riley Mooney, whose mom had to sew two sashes together to accommodate them all.

Earlier this summer, Mooney, a 17-year-old senior from Greenville, earned his 139th and final Boy Scouts of America merit badge — an accomplishment roughly 10 years in the making that was made extra sweet when Riley's scouting journey serendipitously "came full circle," said Jenni Mooney, Riley's mom.

Jenni and Kevin Mooney, Riley's dad, awarded their son his long-awaited badge during the closing campfire in June at Bear Paw Scout Camp in Mountain, Wisconsin, in the same spot where Riley attended one of his earliest activities with his mom in 2014, after graduating from Cub Scout to a Boy Scout the year before.

"He got a big standing ovation, which was pretty awesome," said Jenni Mooney, committee chair of Troop 77, Riley's troop, in Greenville.

Not many scouts achieve the milestone that Riley has, amassing all the merit badges. According to meritbadgeknot.com, a website that tracks such accomplishments but is not associated with Boy Scouts of America, 544 scouts are confirmed to fit this description, with the earliest name going back to 1914.

To put that in perspective, Boy Scouts of America's website says that since the organization's inception in 1910, "more than 130 million young men and women have participated in the BSA's youth programs."

Riley, however, is the second in person in his troop to earn every merit badge available to him. The first was his friend and fellow scout Bailey Rose, the son of Riley's scoutmaster, in 2018.

"Riley is an outstanding young man," Scoutmaster Brian Rose told the Post-Crescent Tuesday.

Every couple of years or so, Rose said a scout comes along who others look up to for leadership and guidance, he said.

"That's Riley right now," he said.

Hungry for a challenge, Riley 'went for it'

Riley credits his great-grandfather William "Wally" Mooney — whose obituary says he was "the oldest living Eagle Scout in the Bay-Lakes Council" before he died in 2015 at the age of 101 — for inspiring him to become an Eagle Scout.

But it was Bailey who challenged Riley to chase after all the merit badges, just as one of Bailey's leaders, Steve Anders, did for him.

The number of merit badges fluctuates, as the Boy Scouts of America has made adjustments over the years. Some merit badges can be done at home, while others require attending a class or joining an activity. In each case, a scout has to figure out all the requirements for a badge, work with a counselor who teaches the topic, and fill out paperwork to confirm they earned a badge.

The goal is to teach teens about different hobbies and skills for potential careers, Brian Rose said. For instance, Bailey, now 23, works as a software engineer after learning about computers, engineering and programming through scouting.

When Bailey issued his challenge to Riley and his peers, Bailey remembers thinking that if anyone took him up on it, he said, it was going to be Riley. Ever since Riley joined the troop, Bailey could tell how driven and invested he was.

"Riley looked at us, and he's like, 'I'm going to do that.'" Jenni Mooney recalled. His parents chuckled and said, "OK. Do you understand how big of a thing that is?"

Looking back now, Riley thinks he was "young" and optimistic."

"I didn't expect that all my free time for the next two years was going to end up being put into merit badges," he said.

That said, "I really enjoy challenges," Riley said, "so I went for it."

COVID-19 pandemic actually helped with earning merit badges

Early on, Riley "took off running," his mother said, quickly scooping up as many badges as he could. Riley arrived at each court of honor ready to show the other scouts his latest achievements.

While some may think the coronavirus pandemic would have been a hurdle, Riley said it was actually "one of my biggest helpers toward getting all of them."

"I was sitting at home, and I didn't really have anything to do," he said, meaning there was plenty of time to complete the many pages of paperwork associated with the badges.

Plus, Riley could meet with counselors virtually to earn badges that he would have otherwise had to drive a couple of hours to complete.

In 2020, Riley finished his Eagle Scout service project, working with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources and the Kids Don't Float program to set up stations with free child-sized life jackets for people to use in and around bodies of water.

By the time he entered high school, Riley slowed down collecting badges, as his life got busier. In 2022, he earned just one, his mother said.

But with encouragement from his parents, Riley buckled down and finally crossed the finish line this year.

Collecting badges required traveling to Key West, fundraising for travel costs to scout bases

Collecting so many merit badges is time consuming, requiring lots of effort to find counselors that teach each of the different topics.

"Scuba is hard. Obviously we don't have a lot of scuba diving in Wisconsin," Jenni Mooney said. "So, we traveled down to Key West for that one."

While she doesn't remember off the top of her head what they were for, Jenni Mooney said she will never forget a December when, on her one free Saturday, Riley asked to go to Fond du Lac for three merit badges he didn't have.

"I packed up all my Christmas presents in the back of our van, and I sat the entire day in my van wrapping Christmas presents" while her soon took a class, she said.

Riley was dedicated, she said, so "I knew if he wanted to do it, I wanted to help make that happen."

Likewise, Riley tried to ease the strain on his parents. To earn the Grand Slam award, which required traveling to all four of the Boy Scouts of America's national high adventure bases around the country, Riley sold popcorn and wreaths to cover not only his own costs, but also for his parents to go with him.

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Riley picks his favorite, most difficult and easiest badges

Riley's sash is filled with so many merit badges, sometimes even he has trouble keeping them all straight. There's one with a DNA thumbprint for fingerprinting. Another is from when he cared for a dog and taught it a new trick.

Riley's favorite is his climbing badge. He found it so fun, he did it twice and eventually taught the class.

To get his backpacking badge, Riley went to New Mexico, where he spent 10 days traversing more than 80 miles.

"That one was probably the most difficult badge to earn, but it wasn't necessarily my least favorite," he said.

That distinction goes to soil and water conversation. Riley said he isn't very interested in geology, and he prefers hands-on learning over sitting in a classroom.

While "the easiest badge is different for everyone," Riley's was swimming, he said, "because I'm a pretty good swimmer."

The final badge added to his sash? Whitewater rafting.

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Riley gives advice to other ambitious scouts

Sitting at Jennerjohn Park in Greenville in late July, Riley said he feels proud, and a bit relieved, about accomplishing what his younger self set out to do. He hopes he can inspire other scouts to do the same.

Life isn't about to slow down for Riley, though. This month, he's headed to the Bahamas for a Boy Scouts sailboat trip. He got a job at Kwik Trip, and Riley will begin his senior year at Hortonville High School in the fall.

"I'm really just looking forward to hanging out with friends as much as I can," he said.

Randee Mooney, Riley's 15-year-old sister, is in Troop 177, Troop 77's sister group, Jenni Mooney said. Randee her eyes set on becoming an Eagle Scout, but she has no interest in following in her brother's footsteps by earning all the merit badges, their mother said.

For those who do, Riley gives the same advice that Bailey gave him: Start young.

Bailey also encourages scouts to "dream big" and remember that the way to eat an elephant is "one bite at a time."

Earning every merit badge may seem "tremendously complicated" at the outset, Bailey said. But if you sit down, focus and chip away at it, pretty soon you'll be eating the whole elephant.

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