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Lancaster County Boy Scout achieves every merit badge available, joining only 350 others who have done it in 107 years

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High school junior Auden Block is a textbook example of how the Boy Scouts' merit badge program can shape a boy's life: By exploring a range of hobbies, outdoor activities and professional skills, Block built confidence, became self-reliant and discovered a potential career.

If someone tried to capture his journey in an actual book, working titles might include "Merit Badge 101: The Unabridged Version," or the more practical "Hey, Mom, I Need Another Sash."

The East Lampeter Township teenager just completed the requirements for his 137th badge, putting him in the rare company of fewer than 350 Scouts who have earned each badge available to them during the organization's 107-year history.

Block accomplished the feat in just five cycling-hiking-music playing-computer programming-packed years.

The 16-year-old will be recognized Monday during a court of honor expected to be attended by two state senators, fellow members of Leola-based Boy Scout Troop 83 and the Pennsylvania Dutch Council. U.S. Rep. Lloyd Smucker will not be in attendance but will send a congratulatory video, according to spokesman Bill Jaffee.

Block will be wearing his uniform and two sashes, to which he or his mother have sewn each round badge emblazoned with a colorful icon.

Start of quest

Block started his quest with a few basic badges during a 2012 summer camp, wanting to move from Scout rank to Tenderfoot.

Block attempted his next badge — graphic design — somewhat begrudgingly in 2012. To fulfill part of the requirement, he attended a daylong event at Thaddeus Stevens College of Technology. He learned about traditional letterpress printing and screen printing and created custom sticky notes.

“I didn’t really know what graphic arts was and wasn’t really interested,” Block recalls. “But it turned out to be an awesome experience, and I really loved it.”

Then he was hooked.

Block earned an average of 27-plus badges per year, an effort that included a few false starts, plenty of positive encouragement and some creative problem-solving.

“It takes dedication and passion, and the realization of, ‘I could do something really special,’” says Alex Marburger, an assistant scoutmaster with Troop 83 and assistant district commissioner for the Conestoga River District of the Pennsylvania Dutch Council.

Block already knew he loved camping, fishing and anything water-related. After completing a scuba diving merit badge at the Lancaster Scuba Center, he was able to join his dad on a scuba trip in Aruba, where they dove to a sunken World War II ship.

A horsemanship badge led him to weekly riding sessions at Flying M Stables in Manheim.

He earned many of his badges under the tutelage of troop leaders and volunteers, including Mike Nedrow, Gregg Bair and Steve Eddy.

But he often roped his parents, Joelle and Jamey Block, into joining him on his quest. They planned family vacations to give him merit-badge opportunities (whitewater rafting in Georgia near his grandparents’ home, skating in Rhode Island during a college visit) and got in quite a bit of exercise, too (an 18-mile backpacking trip with mom, a 50-mile bike race with dad).

Accessibility

Though some of the requirements cost the family money, many did not. Badges like reading, scholarship and collecting are designed to be accessible to every scout.

Sometimes, just keeping track of the requirements was a task itself. Block started a personal fitness badge three times because he kept forgetting to log workouts over a 12-week period.

And then there was bugling. After he'd earned about 100 badges, Block decided to buckle down and get them all.

“I thought there was one — bugling, specifically — that might not get done,” Block says. “After one year of practicing every night for 30 minutes and watching YouTube videos, I was just beginning to make the right sounds.”

Block, an honor student at 21st Century Cyber Charter School, was able to take private lessons and eke out the badge. He doesn't plan to pick up the horn again.

Monumental

Earning every badge is a task that's become more monumental over the history of the Boy Scouts.

Stephen Porter is the first Scout recognized with the accomplishment on meritbadgeknot.com, a website dedicated to tracking such feats. He had to earn just 57 in 1914.

The Boy Scouts of America adds and removes badges from its list to keep up with changing trends. Rapid changes in technology have had a major influence in the 2010s, with several new badges recognizing the importance of science, technology, engineering and math — or STEM — topics.

Block thought his badge quest would end at 136, but the Boy Scouts released its latest badge in December. To earn his exploration badge — complete with an Indiana Jones-style hat and lasso — Block had to plan his own expedition during this summer's National Jamboree in West Virginia.

And he's been doing more than earning badges all this time. He swims competitively with the Lancaster Family YMCA's Lightning, has volunteered at the Humane League of Lancaster County and the Manheim Township Public Library and plays drums in a Civil War reenactment unit.

Pre-law programs

Now he's investigating colleges with pre-law programs, also thanks to scouting.

In pursuit of a law badge, Block attended a session of the Lancaster County Court of Common Pleas and later met in chambers with Judge David Ashworth, a fellow Eagle Scout.

Block says he left inspired by both the experience and the personal encouragement he received.

"I have learned so much along the way," Block says of his overall effort. "It was about learning how much can be achieved by just committing to try and not being afraid to ask for help."

AUDEN BLOCK'S RESUME

Auden Block, 16, has earned several notable achievements as a Boy Scout:

- 137 merit badges, the final one to be awarded Monday during a court of honor ceremony at Zion Lutheran Church in Leola.
- Eagle Scout rank, completed with fundraising for and construction of a puppet theater for the children's section of Manheim Township Public Library.
- Honor Medal, awarded for helping in the rescue of a struggling swimmer in Atlantic City.
- Membership in an Aviation Venture Crew based at Smoketown Airport and in a Sea Scout Unit.

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