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## A Scout of highest merit

A teen in The Woodlands has accomplished a goal met by only 105 other Boy Scouts — earning all 121 badges

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Michael Paulsen Chronicle

Nathaniel Buffington, 15, began earning badges after his family moved to the Houston area in 2005. He earned his last badge, Shotgun Shooting, a few weeks ago.

If there is an enduring archetype of the Boy Scout, especially one who achieves its highest recognition, for many it comes straight from the brush of Norman Rockwell, who returned again and again to this iconic image of American boyhood. His Scout is the straightest of straight arrows, a strapping, outdoorsy kid who loves baseball, salutes the flag, rarely gets into trouble at school and enjoys lazy afternoons at the local fishing hole.

Modern Scouting, of course, is as diverse as the shifting demographic landscape and as contemporary as the new iPhone app for the Handbook. Rockwell's stereotype is as much the stuff of history as the old Official Mess Kits packed away in attics. Case in point: Nathaniel Buffington of The Woodlands, who defies the antique image at every point, was honored this week for the rarest of all Scouting achievements.

The 15-year-old Nathaniel — he of the Radiohead T-shirt and self-professed liberal bent — looks like he might be more at home editing video on his laptop than chopping a pile of firewood at the monthly campout. He has no trouble at school because he doesn't go to one, as his parents prefer home-schooling.

He does not care much for fishing and, being

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from Canada, is just as fond of the Maple Leaf as the Stars and Stripes.

He doesn't dream of someday playing for the Astros or getting into medical school. He wants to write and direct movies, and he gets more satisfaction from a couple of hours spent with an obscure French film than an afternoon at Minute Maid Park.

But for reasons he is not exactly sure about, Nathaniel set his mind to obtaining every merit badge — all 121 of them — from Golf to Cooking to Nuclear Science.

He finished a few weeks ago by snaring the Shotgun Shooting badge, thanks to an afternoon at the range blasting clay pigeons, and was honored Wednesday night at a ceremony four years in the making. There is no more to-do list. The green sash has no more room for badges.

**New knowledge**

“It was a lot of work, a lot more than I was expecting, but I got a lot out of it,” Nathaniel said. “At the very least, I've got a lot of memories. But more than that, I've got a little knowledge about a lot of stuff. If somebody brings up almost any subject, I can talk about it. And I was glad to see that I could set a goal and accomplish it.”

Nathaniel started in Scouting not long after his family, which includes two brothers and two sisters, moved to the Houston area in 2005.

He obtained his first four merit badges at a Central Texas summer camp, then decided he would get more. Soon he met brothers Bryce and Scott Vaughan of Spring at another camp. They told him they were in the process of earning all

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of Scouting's merit badges, which they eventually did.

“I had 30 to 40 badges, so I thought, why not?” Nathaniel said. “I figured I would learn about stuff. It was completely my choice. There was no pressure from my parents. They helped me, of course, but whether I finished was completely about me.”

**Range of interest**

Not every subject was of particular interest. A few were more gross than engrossing, including Fishing, which required him to clean the fish he caught, and Public Health.

“I had to go to a sewage treatment plant so I could explain how it works,” Nathaniel said. “The guy who was working there, well, you could tell he doesn't get many visitors. He was really excited to give us a two-hour tour. The smell was really bad.”

But there was more fun than drudgery. The badge for Cinematography was right up his alley, and the one for Golf introduced him to a sport he hopes to take up.

The Aviation badge meant an exciting first experience in a small plane, while Cycling translated into a grueling but satisfying ride with his father in the MS-150 marathon from Houston to Austin.

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Citizenship In The Community introduced him to small-time politics at its most humorous when all the members of a neighborhood association board except one resigned en masse at the meeting he attended because of a dispute with the remaining member.

### One of a small group

Nathaniel now has every right to brag.

According to Merit Badge Knot, a Scouting group that keeps track of the ultimate achievers, only 105 other Scouts have been confirmed as obtaining all the badges. There are a dozen or so unconfirmed cases. But he figures he'll keep his rare status mostly to himself.

"My friends? One of them thinks it's sort of lame, and he kids me about it in a nice way," he said. "Most of the others don't even know about it. Scouts don't talk about Scouting a lot, probably from a fear of mockery. It doesn't exactly make me Mr. Cool to have every single merit badge."

It does mean, however, that he can discuss dentistry, drafting and dog care. And he knows how fix a shelf, a chair and a toilet.

He had to repair three household items to get his Home Repairs badge, which was no mean feat in a relatively new house that's nicely furnished.

He admits — and one hopes this does not violate a Scouting code — that his dad had to break the toilet so that he could fix it.

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