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Column - Jon Mark Beilue: Scout blows it out 121 merit badges, and that's just a start

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Tuesday night was a court of honor night for the Boy Scouts at St. Thomas the Apostle Church in Amarillo. These little affairs, where selected Scouts are recognized for their recent work, are held three to four times a year. It's usually a parents thing with a few Scout leaders thrown in.

This one was different. It wasn't nearly so ordinary because Coleman Carter is so far removed from ordinary. Carter, nearly 18, is about to leave the Scouts. And he's leaving in a way that's truly remarkable.

To become an Eagle Scout, the organization's highest honor, a minimum of 21 merit badges are required. Most average around 30. Carter became an Eagle at 13. But he's kept going ... and going ... and going.

There are 121 merit badges for Scouts, and Carter has earned every darn one of them. In the sports vernacular, it would be like when Babe Ruth hit 54 home runs in 1920 and the previous record was 29.

The Boy Scouts of America say that only one-half of 1 percent of all Scouts run the merit badge table. It's just so far out there that 99.5 percent of all Scouts don't even consider it, much less do it.

"I've been around thousands of kids, and this is an exceptional, unusual young man," said Bob Altman, Golden Spread Council assistant Scout executive. "He's unbelievable. He's just amazing."

Carter began accumulating merit badges in the fifth grade at a faster rate than his scouting peers. Sometime around the age of 13 or 14, he realized he had a shot to get all 121 if he just stayed with it.

"I thought that would be a neat way to distinguish myself," Carter said. "It's just something notable that I knew would take a lot of hard work, but also a neat accomplishment."

The last 40 or so merit badges can be unusual, requiring finding those who can teach them or going to out-of-the-way places to earn them. Carter took a pottery class with his mother, Edie, at Amarillo College, for one.

He earned a backpacking badge with a 100-mile hike over a week at the Philmont camp in New Mexico. To earn a cycling badge, he'd done a series of trips, but needed a final 50-miler last October. When a few friends couldn't go at the last minute, Edie took up the cause and pedaled with him.

The hardest one to obtain, though, was, oddly, bugling.

"I played the piano when I was younger, but I'm no musical expert," he said. "But after a lot of coaching and fiddling around with it, I could blow a tune on it. It wasn't the prettiest thing, but I got it done."

If, by now, you think Coleman Carter fits that stereotype of the nerdy, single-minded socially awkward kid who holes up in his room playing Dungeons and Dragons in his spare time, it's time to put that notion away.

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Jon Mark Beilue



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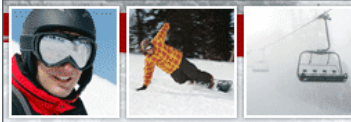
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