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RANTOUL — There are 137 merit badges that Boy Scouts can earn. Cullen LaKemper of Morton has earned them all. And two more.

The 17-year-old LaKemper, an Eagle Scout, earned the final one — the exploration badge — on Friday at the annual Boy Scout Space Jam event at the Rantoul airport.

There were no bells and whistles. No ceremony marking the occasion. Just the satisfaction for LaKemper that he had done his best in scouting.

His troop will hold a court of honor later this year at which LaKemper will be feted.

That kind of achievement appears to be a trait of the LaKemper family. Old brother Brian, now 21, earned 137 badges while in the Boy Scouts. But Cullen has family bragging rights with 139, although two of them are duplicates as the scouts have changed the name of two badges. (Movie making, for instance, is now called cinematography.)

Having joined Cub Scouts when LaKemper was in first grade, he said he saw what it took to earn merit badges by tagging along with his brother.

“I went to a lot of merit badge days and clinics with him when he was earning all of them, so I earned a lot of them because I was with him,” Cullen said.

Cullen crossed over into Boy Scouts in fifth grade and started earning merit badges that December.

Not all merit badges are created equal, according to LaKemper.

“Different badges have different requirements,” he said, noting that some such as the exploration badge take only a couple of hours in a class to earn, while others take a lot more effort.

The personal fitness badge, for instance, involves weeks of training. Afterward, he ran in the 4-mile Steamboat Classic.



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Photo by: Dave Hinton/Rantoul Press
Boy Scout Cullen LaKemper wears the sashes that contain the merit badges he has earned over the years. LaKemper earned his 139th merit badge Friday at Space Jam, the Boy Scout jamboree held during the weekend at the Rantoul airport.

Earning all of the scout badges is not a common occurrence. Boy Scouts of America said only about 18 boys per year reach that goal.

In the history of scouting, about 343 have earned all of the badges.

LaKemper said he has favorite badges.

“I really like the chess merit badge,” he said. “Scuba diving was fun.”

Having been to Space Jam the last “four-five years,” he estimates he has earned 10-12 badges at the Rantoul event.

Earning the badges has been educational, LaKemper said.

“It’s been really interesting learning about a lot of different things — different hobbies and professions that I didn’t really know much about before.”

LaKemper said he was always interested in computers, “but I did programming and really enjoyed doing that. That’s what I want to do” as a profession, “probably computer engineering.”

The Eagle Scout said he has been looking at several colleges, most of which are engineering schools.

As for the Space Jam event as a whole, he has looked forward to it every year, especially when the scouts are able to speak by radio to astronauts orbiting in the International Space Station. He was selected one year to ask a question of the astronauts.

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