

# Boy Scout earns the most merit badges and learns life lessons along the way

By Martha Garcia

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Courtesy photo: Cole Olsen, 17, made a deal with his dad to get 100 Boy Scout merit badges so he could get a puppy. Along the way, Olsen learned life lessons and refocused his goal to get 137 merit badges, the most merit badges available to earn by any Boy Scout.

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When Jake Olsen began the challenge of completing 100 Boy Scout merit badges, he wanted to persuade his Dad to get him a puppy. By the time Olsen completed 137 badges, the project turned into much more.

Olsen, now 17 and a senior at Saugus High School, joined the Boy Scouts when he was 11. The troop was associated with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints in Saugus. Most of his friends from church joined too.

By the time he was 13, Olsen had 10 merit badges. He wanted to persuade his Dad to let him have a dog, so he suggested the merit badge goal.

“At the time I really wasn’t into scouting and my Dad really didn’t want me to get a dog,” explained Olsen. “So I asked, if I could get 100, could I get a dog. He said sure, thinking there was no way it would happen.”

Olsen worked hard. He contacted merit badge counselors, enlisted the help of his parents, scout master, and family friends. Within five years Olsen earned 100 merit badges in categories such as, hiking, engineering, safety, first aid, and leadership.

Courtesy photo

Jake Olsen prepares for a scuba certification course, a class he had to take to earn his Scuba Diving merit badge.

Along the way, Olsen learned more skills. He began to understand teamwork, leadership, a sense of community, compassion for others, and kindness.

Olsen explained many of the scout ideals are similar to the values of his church, such as trustworthiness, loyalty and helpfulness.

“Church has always been a big part of my life,” said Olsen. “As Scouts and as part of our church we try to help others, be respectful, kind and set an example. We work hard and serve others.”

Art Balena has been a Scout leader for 10 years and was Olsen’s Scout Master for four years.

“Jake has always been motivated,” said Balena. “He has a stick-to-it type of attitude. Some badges he had to try two or three times and he wouldn’t quit until he reached his goal.”

### **A new challenge**

Most Boy Scouts earn about 25 merit badges. The Boy Scouts requires 22 to earn Eagle Scout, the highest level of Scouting.

“It was tough managing my homework and scouting and it was very time consuming,” said Olsen.

He reached his 100 merit badge goal and decided to push on. The Boy Scouts offers 137 merit badges total. Olsen was only 37 away from completing them all.

“It became a new challenge,” said Olsen. “I thought I was done; but then I set a new goal and decided I couldn’t stop now.”

Balena said he was quite surprised by Olsen’s goal considering very few Boy Scouts will earn that many. A total of 321 people have earned all possible merit badges in the history of the Boy Scouts of America. About 18 will complete the challenge each year nationally, and Olsen was one of the few.

“At some point it changed from a challenge to a way of life,” said Olsen. “I had to prove to myself I could do this.”

Some badges require a great deal of planning, like the Plant Science badge, others footwork, like the hiking merit badge which required him to complete multiple 20 mile hikes. His favorites are scuba diving and kayaking.

### Lessons in scouting

Courtesy photo  
During his journey to 137 merit badges Olsen earned the Eagle Scout honor, the highest rank in Scouting, and the Hornaday award, which is an award for conservation in nature in a Scouting project.

A big lesson Olsen learned during his merit badge journey included the importance of community service, which is both a value taught by the Scouts and the Mormon Church.

Throughout his scouting career he undertook several community service projects, painting school curbs, putting up Christmas lights, and changing smoke detector batteries for families in his neighborhood.

For his Eagle Scout project he organized and lead the effort to repair bird aviaries for hawks and eagles at the Placerita Nature Center. With more than 100 service hours combined, Olsen’s group of 40 volunteers replaced skylights, repaired walls, and painted the bird mews.

“I love nature so I went to the nature center to see if there was anything I could do for them there,” said Olsen.

Olsen earned the Hornaday Award for his project, which is an honor given to the top projects that focus on conservation in nature. Olsen wants to be a Scout Master in the future.

He also hopes to continue his career as a Scout by helping other boys reach their goals and shared his advice for those thinking of starting their journey to 137 badges.

“Determination, teamwork and leadership are important qualities for a scout,” said Olsen. “You just have to work hard and set small goals. Don’t think of it as 137. Do a little at a time and have fun.”

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Martha Garcia

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