

## A Boost Toward Eagle

*By Lori Murray*

**A council's special camp helps older Scouts move up the Trail to Eagle by offering instruction in required merit badges - plus a healthy dose of high adventure.**

The dining hall at D-Bar-A Scout Ranch in Metamora, Mich., shakes with enthusiasm as the 162 prospective Eagle Scouts explode in a competition of chants and yells.

*"We've got spirit. Yes we do! We've got spirit. How 'bout you?"*

A sea of yellow baseball-capped youngsters start in unison: *"Yel-low! Yel-low! Yel-low!"* A return of spirit from the blue-hat troop follows: *"Go Blue! Go Blue! Go Blue!"*

The noise is music to the ears of Trail to Eagle camp program director Ed Basar and camp coordinator Ron Schwartz, who run the Detroit Area Council's camp for prospective Eagle Scouts. As the noise fest escalates, the smiles on their faces widen. This is just the kind of enthusiasm they work hard to instill in camp participants.

"They come to camp not knowing anybody," says Schwartz. "At the end of the week, they are willing to give all for their troop color."

But the purpose of creating team spirit goes way beyond the color of members' caps. "We are trying to give these young men something they can't get any other time or any other place," Schwartz explains.

That something includes an "enthusiasm for Scouting" that results in a determination to complete the requirements for Eagle Scout.

"We want the boys who couldn't finish all their requirements this week to go home and say, 'I want to come back next year and finish,'" adds Basar. A jump start Created to give older boys a jump-start toward finishing the requirements for their Eagle Award, the weeklong experience provides Scouts with unlimited opportunities for accomplishment.

Basar became head of the Trail to Eagle program in its second year and was joined by his boyhood friend Ron Schwartz. They assembled a team of 55 adult volunteers who deliver instruction for completing all but one of the 21 merit badges required for Eagle, as well as more than 38 additional badges (many of which include a healthy dose of outdoor adventure).

Basar served as camp director for 17 years at the picturesque, 1,800-acre D-Bar-A Scout ranch, which is located an hour north of Detroit. He is familiar with the inner workings of the ranch, including its animal menagerie - horses, Longhorn cattle, burros, and, at one time,

buffalo. With three lakes, a network of hiking trails, and outstanding physical facilities, the ranch-turned-camp is a perfect backdrop for the week's activities.

To attend the camp, boys must be at least 13 years old and First Class or above. "They are the cream of the crop, easy to work with, highly motivated, and good team players," says Basar, who knows a lot about motivating youth - for 37 years he has taught physical education in one of Detroit's toughest inner-city neighborhoods.

According to Basar, the best way to bring the boys together is to have identifications. At Trail to Eagle camp, this means colors, and each camper is randomly assigned to a color-coded troop for the week.

Scouts attend six hours of classes daily, with evenings free for outdoor adventures or other activities. They wear a field uniform or activity uniform at all times. Everyone sleeps in cabins to encourage camaraderie and comfort (plus no time is spent on setting up and taking down equipment).

Basar credits the program's success to the dedication and quality of the staff, whose members range in age from 18 to 65. "This program is only as good as these 55 volunteers," he says. "For 75 percent of them, their lifework or hobby is the merit badge they are teaching."

Jason Booza, 20, of Troop 1452 in Sterling Heights, Mich., attended one of the first Trail to Eagle camps and can attest to the impact that staff can have on a Scout.

"Because of this camp, I got my Eagle," he says, "and it had a lot to do with the staff." Booza was so impressed by the members of the staff that he became one himself. After serving as a junior assistant Scoutmaster, he's now an assistant Scoutmaster and coordinator for the junior assistant Scoutmasters.

Another example of staff dedication is Frank Mallon, a veteran of four summers.

As an instructor for the Cinematography merit badge, he helps Scouts create skits, plan scripts and storyboards, act, and do camera work and editing. As Scoutmaster for the white-hat troop, he carries on traditions like the Friday night pizza party and the "spirit stick." (Raise the stick, yelling begins, and troop spirit soars.)

## **A unique school**

Schwartz and Basar don't disagree with those who say Trail to Eagle is more like a school than a camp. School-like standards are maintained in areas like completion of requirements and quality of instruction.

"You don't just come and get handed a badge," says Schwartz. Many badges require hours of preparation prior to camp, and attendees must sign up in advance for classes, at which they learn from adult role models who are experts in their fields.

But Trail to Eagle is also unlike any schools most of the Scouts have attended. "Here you get to see your friends all the time, and you get to touch the outdoors," says Daniel

McKernan, 13, of Troop 1682 in Southfield, Mich. Greg Deratany, 15, from Troop 1407 in St. Claire Shores, Mich., appreciates instructor quality and dedication. "They explain things clearly and they really understand it," he says. "It has either happened to them or they have been teaching it for many years. And they like to do it."

In the dining hall, merit badge classes are in session - Personal Management, Citizenship in the World, Citizenship in the Community, Public Speaking, Collections, Sports, and Safety.

## **Learning everywhere**

Outside, visiting Scouters from Taiwan and Canada answer questions about their countries. Martin Anderson, 15, of Troop 5 in Detroit, observes that "Scouting is good here in the U.S., but I would like to see how it's done in other parts of the world."

Nearby, Frank Cleary consults with Scouts working on the Collections merit badge. He reviews about 50 collections, ranging from Michael Jordan basketball cards to assorted devices for performing magic tricks. "These youngsters certainly have creative imaginations when it comes to choosing something to collect," Cleary observes. "But the general subject of collecting is something they're really interested in, and they love talking about it."

Not far away a grouping of bright red barns dots the ranch landscape. Here boys are learning about farm mechanics.

After four days of instruction, 17-year-old Tim Boulanger of Troop 1705 in Troy, Mich., remains highly impressed. "This is all hands-on stuff," he says. "We learned general maintenance, like changing the oil and greasing the machines, and how the engines work."

In an Indian village, boys learn outdoor cooking and wilderness survival skills. In the climbing area, they practice rappelling down a tower. The whole camp buzzes with the transfer of knowledge.

Since its inception four years ago, the camp program has evolved into a highly motivational week of events. Scouts come from five councils in three states. In 1998, 162 Eagle candidates earned 995 merit badges, slightly more than six badges per Scout, up from 1997's 5.3 badges per Scout.

Schwartz credits the growth to better preparation by Scouts for any badge requirements they have to do prior to coming to camp and a more determined effort once in camp. All this, he adds, is "a credit to the individual camp troop leadership.

"We've become more sophisticated, more professional - and tougher," says Schwartz. "We now know what we want to do and what to expect when we do it."

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