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What kind of Scout gets every merit badge?

BY DAVID WHITING

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A green sash covered with more Boy Scouts of America merit badges than one can imagine sits on the wood coffee table in the Nelsen family home.

There are merit badges for cooking and crime prevention, for golf and graphic arts, for scuba diving and sculpture. There are badges for American labor, composite materials and truck transportation.

There's even a merit badge for collections. I smile wondering if collecting merit badges counts.

Check the Boy Scouts' list of merit badges and all but one of the 128 merit badges is sewn on the sash.

On Saturday, Dec. 4, Rob Nelsen, 15, of Irvine was awarded the badge for inventing. It was the last in his journey to earn every badge, an accomplishment that few scouts attempt or would *want* to attempt.

I earned, like, three.

But Nelsen's no ordinary scout. He's a boy on a mission. Given his level of maturity, one could say he's a man on a mission.

You know the phrase, "Be all you can be."

Nelsen takes it a quantum leap farther.

Be *more* than you can be.

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Nelsen, six-foot-two, is the only freshman on Tustin High School's junior varsity basketball team. He also plays baseball, is active with Model United Nations, is on the Academic Decathlon team and has a 4-plus grade average.

Oh yeah, he also completed his Eagle Scout project a year ago. He led Troop 856 to build a platform for Special Olympics ceremonies.

Yes, he's the kind of guy some kids love to hate.

Good luck with that.

Nelsen also happens to be nice. He speaks with the trace of a lisp left from speech processing challenges he learned to overcome a few years ago.

When pressed about his accomplishments, he self-consciously glances down and is quick to down-play them or give credit to others.

Like being elected class president.

In an aw-shucks manner, dark-blond bangs hanging, Nelsen, whose mother, Marylou, is a first grade teacher in Santa Ana, tells me his election had little to do with being popular. Instead, he credits hallway posters.

He doesn't mention he created and put up the posters.

"I was the only one with posters," he says looking up and smiling with genuine amazement at what he considers luck.

For the merit badges, Nelsen credits life-long friend and fellow scout Michael Judd, a sophomore at Pacific Coast High School.

Nelsen explains it was Judd who helped him through the weirdest merit badge (insect study), the toughest (plumbing), as well as the most fun, aviation.

For the aviation badge, the pair climbed aboard a small plane at Flabob Airport in Riverside County. The pilot let them handle the controls, guiding them through some turns. Judd beams telling the story.

But it's not all goodie two-shoes. Judd and Nelsen, are regular teen-age boys.

Their favorite video game?

"Call of Duty: Black Ops."

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What are the ingredients that create a teenager who earns 128 merit badges, that creates a kid who wins an award in fifth grade for the most pages read?

Nelsen ponders the question. Part of the answer is sitting in the living room.

There is Nelsen's dad, Gil, a professional photographer who helps his son plan and schedule. He also serves as cheer eader as well as driver to far-flung places his son needs to get to.

There is Judd, his patient buddy who helps make the work fun. And there is Judd's dad, Fred, troop committee chairman and mentor.

"We're thrilled to have Rob in the troop," Fred Judd tells me. "He's a great example for the rest of the scouts."

But the support team is only part of the success recipe. When Nelsen opens up, there are other clues.

Since he was a little kid, he's had long-range goals. His were to become independent, have enough money to entertain friends and help others. He zeroed in on going to UCLA, getting a law degree and becoming a corporate lawyer.

In short, Nelsen not only has a clear vision, but a plan on how to achieve it.

But most importantly, Nelsen, whose sister, Gabrielle, is a college sophomore, understood that achieving success takes hard work.

What's the connection with all the merit badges?

Several years ago, Nelsen became friends with Travis Cochran, a Lake Arrowhead Eagle Scout from Troop 104 who earned all the BSA merit badges. Cochran went on to become a punter at USC.

Nelsen figured he'd follow a similar path.

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Perhaps it goes without saying that Nelsen is ultra competitive.

But that doesn't mean Nelsen's crushed when his team loses. While he doesn't like losing, Nelsen's main competition is himself.

He wants to see how far he can push his body and mind.

Nelsen translates his words into action, whether it's practicing swimming, baseball, basketball or academic decathlon. He tells me, "I don't like to be bored."

He carefully manages his time so he can put two hours a day into becoming a better basketball player, so he can put another two hours a day several days a week into academic decathlon, so he can make sure he does well in school.

Nelsen's journey reminds me of the old joke in which someone asks, "How do you get to Carnegie Hall?"

Practice.

Most everyone has the desire to win. *Wanting* to win is easy. Fewer of us, however, have the determination to practice.

But a lanky 15-year-old in Irvine is teaching us.

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