

Are You Smarter Than a Boy Scout?

Scoutmasters wrote the book on camping, and built an army of pack toting teens. But do the troops truly rule when it comes to outdoor skills? We pitted three Scouts against three average readers to find out.

By Jim Gorman

Opponents: Troop 43 vs. Team BACKPACKER

TROOP 43: We recruited three scouts from a 40-member troop in Princeton, New Jersey, that spends 10 weekends in the woods each year; older members take a 50-mile backpacking trip each summer in New Hampshire's White Mountains, Yellowstone, or Yosemite. The contenders-Todd Kelmar, 15, Adam Perez, 15, and Michael Treves, 14-have all reached Life-rank (that's one step shy of Eagle) and acquired their camping merit badge.

TEAM BACKPACKER: We selected three readers with average hiking experience: David Mays, 35, a software engineer from Palmyra, New Jersey; Jeff Thompson, 29, owner of a window cleaning service in Philadelphia; and Louis Tevere, 42, an IT professional from Wyncote, Pennsylvania. Each camp between 10 and 20 nights a year.

Proving Grounds

The Pine Barrens of central New Jersey at Lakehurst Naval Station

The Goal

Test outdoor know-how in 10 skills-based, head-to-head contests pulled straight from the pages of *The Boy Scout Handbook*

The Prize

Our Golden Boot Award is a 19-inch-tall trophy of rugged beauty-in the form of a Cabela's Laramie Peak Mid Hiker spray-painted in a lush gold-lame shade.

Let the games begin

The teams gather on a warm, sunny day last spring, and after a few friendly hellos and pregame refreshments, things get testy. "*It's time to kick some Scout heinie,*" taunts Jeff Thompson, the window cleaner from Philly. "*We'll see about that, old man,*" replies take-charge Adam. "*Got any more of those Cokes?*" inquires a voice from the crowd that's attached to a visibly overstimulated 11-year-old.

1. Bear Bagging

Game On

Each team gets a 50-foot section of nylon rope, a stuff sack containing 15 pounds of food and no instructions. Ready, set, go. Team BACKPACKER dashes for a spindly pine. While Jeff knots one end of the rope to the sack, David ties off the other end to a

chunk of wood. He sails the rope over a high branch. Louis and Jeff hold the sack aloft while David hoists it, then ties off the rope. Done in 2 minutes, 15 seconds.

Troop 43 has a rough start. Adam attempts to swing the heavy sack up and over a branch of a shrubby tree. Todd and Michael steal glances at the adults' progress and pepper Adam with advice. "*I told you we should have tossed a stick instead,*" complains Michael, after the sack lodges in a tangle of lower branches. Two more attempts yield similarly dismal results. Six minutes later, the Scouts give up.

Winner

Team BACKPACKER takes it in a run-away. Readers: 1, Scouts: 0

By the Book

Bear bags should hang "*at least 12 feet off the ground and eight or more feet away from the trunks of trees,*" says *The Boy Scout Handbook*. The accompanying illustration depicts stringing a bear bag between two trees, but offers no explanation on exactly how to do it. Try this: 1) Select a pair of branches 20 feet apart and at least 15 feet off the ground. 2) Tie one end of a rope to a tree trunk. 3) Throw the other end, weighted, over both branches in succession. 4) Tie a knotted loop (bight) in the cord midway between the branches. 5) Attach the bag to the loop with a knot or carabiner. 6) Pull on the unsecured end of the cord to lift the bag to the correct height and tie it off.

2. Firestarting

Game On

Each team receives a plastic garbage bag filled with assorted sticks ranging from pipe cleaner to wrist-size, plus a firepan, magnesium firestarter, pocket-knife, and a marshmallow. (**Dirty trick:** We soaked the wood with a hose.) Teams must gather tinder from the immediate vicinity. First team to brown the marshmallow wins.

The Scouts plunk a handful of dry pine needles in the center of their firepan. Adam shaves bits of the magnesium on top. Todd and Michael neatly stack their soaked firewood. The magnesium chips flash' white-hot, but they quickly fizzle. The clock is ticking.

Meanwhile, Team BACKPACKER is already tending a flame. Like the Scouts, they used the pine needles as tinder-but with a crucial difference. "We scraped magnesium on the paper packaging the firestarter came in. Then fed the needles," explains David. "Flamed right up." Louis returns from the woods with a stick. At 4 minutes, 39 seconds he produces a perfect marshmallow: crispy on the outside, gooey on the inside.

Winner

Team BACKPACKER is twice as fast, with better results. Almost 10 minutes into the contest, the Scouts raise a flame and produce a charred marshmallow. Readers: 2, Scouts: 0

By the Book

Campfire success depends on tinder - the more flammable, the better. *The Handbook* advises mounding kindling atop loose tinder, arranging a tepee of small and medium-size fuel on top. Our add: Slice shavings of magnesium into a small pile, beneath loose tinder. When the tinder flames, add kindling.

3. Knot Tying

Game On

In this essential test, teams get a four-foot section of rope and instructions to a square knot, clove hitch, and bowline.

Winner

So much for a blowout. The Scouts whip out all three knots before Team BACKPACKER can even agree on what a square knot looks like. "*Not my strength*," confesses Louis. Readers: 2, Scouts: 1

By the Book

If you can remember one knot, make it the bowline. It's easy to tie, and doesn't slip or jam under tension. To tie one, use the old mnemonic: The rabbit comes out of the hole, goes around the tree, and back down the hole.

4. Pack Loading and Fitting

Game On

Each team gets a tent, sleeping bag, stove, fuel, clothing, and other equipment. Everything must go into an REI Passage 65 pack; then the team must adjust the pack to fit a team member.

"*No, no, no. The tent goes toward the top, not down low*," Todd practically yells at the other Scouts. "*Map in the top pocket!*" insists Adam. Amid the arguing,

tussling, and jamming of gear at close quarters, the teams resemble two rugby scrums.

Winner

Team BACKPACKER posts the faster time but loses on accuracy to Troop 43's meticulous packing strategy. By stuffing its tent and food bag toward the top, Team BACKPACKER was top-heavy; Troop 43 hit the sweet spot: with the center of gravity between the shoulder blades. As for fitting, both squads succeed at extending their harnesses to sit correctly on a teammate's shoulders and hips, but the Scouts also win this contest by getting the center of gravity right (see below). Neither team deals with stove fuel correctly (seal it against leaks in a plastic bag, then tuck into a lower, exterior pocket). Readers: 2, Scouts: 2

By the Book

The Boy Scout Handbook offers tips on organizing gear in a backpack ("*Arrange soft items so that they will cushion your back*"), but is mum on weight distribution. Internal frame backpacks carry best when loaded with heavy items like food, water, and tent at shoulder height and close to your back. Lighter, bulky gear like cook kits and clothing go in the lower and middle of the pack. Your sleeping bag squishes into the bottom compartment.

5. Packing the 10 Essentials

Game On

From equal piles of assorted gear and clothing, each team must pull out ***The 10 Essentials***, those butt-saving items no wilderness traveler should leave home without. To make it harder, we included toilet paper, a water filter, a spork, and other distractions.

Winner

Troop 43. The Scouts finished 30 seconds behind Team BACKPACKER but the youngsters got 9 out of 10 correct (they left out sun protection, which *The Handbook* cites-but is debatable). The seniors picked two incorrect items, including toilet paper. "It doubles as a firestarter," argues David. Nice try. Readers: 2, Scouts: 3

By the Book

Exactly what constitutes the 10 emergency essentials is controversial. *The Handbook* lists a 1) pocketknife, 2) first-aid kit, 3) extra clothing, 4) raingear, 5) water bottle, 6) flashlight, 7) trail food, 8) matches and firestarter, 9) sun protection, and 10) map and compass. Other sources variously swap in a repair kit, space blanket, whistle, and garbage sack.

6. Tent Pitch!

Game On

Each team gets a lightweight Big Agnes Copper Spur UL2 tent. First team to pitch theirs correctly wins. Team BACKPACKER goes right to work. Jeff snaps the hubbed poles into their I-shape configuration, while David lays out the tent body. Louis has the cross pole and rainfly ready.

The Scouts, meanwhile, fail to observe that the short end of the poll assembly aligns with the tent body. Once they get that sorted out, Todd is left holding the cross pole. "*Where's this go?*" he asks. Nobody is sure.

Winner

Team BACKPACKER, no contest. In 2 minutes, 24 seconds, they pitch a drum-tight tent. At 4 minutes, 53 seconds, Team Scout stakes the last guyline. It's all tied up as we enter homestretch. Readers: 3, Scouts: 3

By the Book

Orient the tent with its lowest point into the wind; avoid setting up in a low-lying area where water could collect; drive stakes into the ground at an angle, with the tops pointing away from the shelter (fill stuffsacks with snow and bury them during the winter); and always guy out the rain fly tightly to increase stability and reduce unwanted condensation.

7. Cooking

Game On

Teams must prime and fire up an MSR SimmerLite stove, then cook an edible flapjack using pancake mix, shortening, and a nonstick frypan. The white-gas SimmerLite requires some know-how, and the Scouts properly pump the fuel bottle and insert the fuel line but cannot get fuel to flow. Minutes evaporate as Adam retries the same sequence without success. The Scouts' frustration grows as they peek over at the adults. Instructions to the stove lay unopened beside them.

Winner

In 5 minutes, 24 seconds, Team BACKPACKER presents a lightly browned cake, ready for syrup. David examines the Scouts' stove and identifies the problem. "*You needed to snap this catch arm into place for the fuel to flow,*" he says. Readers: 4, Scouts: 3

By the Book

Inexplicably, *The Handbook* relegates flapjacks to car-camping fare. But backpackers can make perfect pancakes using a nonstick pan like the MSR Flex Skillet. See page 51 for tips on using a liquid-fuel stove and page 50 for two delicious pancake recipes.

8. First Aid

Game On

The scenario: a severely sprained ankle. The goal: treat the injury, improvise a stretcher out of assorted clothing and two long poles, and carry a teammate 15 yards across the finish line. Each squad wisely appoints its smallest member to play the victim, then tears into a first-aid kit and correctly selects an elastic bandage for an ankle wrap. Troop 43 quickly stabilizes Todd's right ankle and scoots him onto a stretcher made of a rain jacket and hiking pants. They're seconds ahead of Team BACKPACKER. In the race to the finish, Michael stumbles under the load and the older team almost closes the gap, but the Scouts make a youthful lunge for the finish line.

Winner

Troop 43, by a hair. Readers: 4, Scouts: 4

By the Book

Both teams correctly immobilized the victim's ankle and built a sturdy stretcher by slipping poles through arm and leg holes in clothing. Typically hikers with sprains are able to walk out, which is always a better option than carrying someone. "*If you suffer a sprain and must keep walking,*" *The Handbook* advises, "*don't remove your shoe or boot.*" That's because swelling could prevent you from putting it back on, seriously hampering your ability to self-evacuate.

9. Orienteering

Game On

We created two equal-length courses in the forest, and planted three tacky-looking ornamental frogs along each one. The teams receive a compass and a course description-composed of the bearing and distance to each of their three frogs. The goal: find the frogs, gather them up, and return to the starting line as quickly as possible.

Winner

Team BACKPACKER simply took their bearing, spread out, and started running. "*We knew one of us would find the frog ornament if we kept our bearing, so the exact distance was immaterial,*" explains Jeff. Smart. They finish in less than two minutes. Meanwhile, the Scouts wander *waaaay* off track in a meadow while looking for the second frog. Troop 43 needs an assist from the judge to get back on course. Readers: 5, Scouts: 4.

By the Book

The Boy Scout Handbook gives clear instructions on taking and following a bearing. (Compass in hand,

turn the compass housing until the direction of travel indicator matches the desired bearing. Then rotate the compass until the red needle points north. You're oriented. Now sight along the direction of travel arrow, pick out a landmark, and walk toward it.) The Scouts were good up until they passed an old logging cable that moved the needle a few degrees. Not in *The Handbook*: Metal throws off a magnetic compass. (The disorienting effect is often caused by car hoods and belt buckles.)

10. Flag Folding

Game On

Okay, it's hard to argue that flag folding is an essential outdoor skill. But with the adults leading by one—arguably because they had an advantage from using a wider range of more modern gear—it seems only fair to throw the Scouts a gimme.

Winner

The teens obviously know their way around a flag, but Team BACKPACKER smells victory and goes all out. The old guys' folded Old Glory is a thing of beauty: a small, tight wedge of cloth that's half the size of Troop 43's flag and finished 20 seconds faster. "*I had to fold the flag after weekly Scout meetings. I just never forgot how to do it;*" explains David, the engineer. His admission throws the final score into doubt. Once a Scout, always a Scout?

In 1975, Jim Gorman earned Eagle Scout ranking with the very same Troop 43.

The Boy Scout Quiz

Could you earn a merit badge in wilderness travel?

Better ace this test, taken straight from the Scouts' own *Backpacking Merit Badge* book.

- The "*Hypothermia Challenge*" is:
 - A cold-water immersion test held at the annual National Scout Jamboree. Winners earn the Polar Bear Merit Badge.
 - A winter version of the Pinewood Derby in which contestants race homemade cars on frozen lakes
 - A test to determine if hypothermia is a risk.
 - Can you walk heel-to-toe on a 30-foot line scratched into the ground?
- True or False? In a thunderstorm, taking shelter in a steel-framed building is your safest choice.
- Which one of the following is not a sign of dehydration?
 - headache
 - confusion
 - profuse sweating
 - fatigue
- Avalanches occur most frequently on slopes that are between ____ and ____ degrees.
- Which one of the following is not a designated role on a Scout backpacking trip?
 - navigator
 - sweep
 - chef
 - pacesetter
- Heatstroke occurs when a person's core temperature rises higher than:
 - 98°F
 - 101°F
 - 105°F
 - 108°F
- Which snake color pattern is dangerous?
 - Red on yellow
 - Red on black
- In cold weather, grayish-white patches of skin indicate **frostbite** has already set in. Or is it **frostnip**?
- On a topographic map, the color purple:
 - Designates man-made structures-buildings, bridges, railroads, etc.
 - Shows revisions that are based on aerial photos.
 - Indicates areas with high concentrations of seasonal wildflowers.
- Scouting began in which country:
 - Canada
 - South Africa
 - United States
 - Scotland
- You're lost in the backcountry. You should...
 - Use thumbnail navigation. It will get you back to your last known location.
 - Hike south. Anywhere In the Lower 48, you're sure to cross a road within 10 miles.
 - Stay put, make your team comfortable, and wait for rescue.
- True or false? Mild electric shock (such as from a car battery) is an effective method of treating a snakebite.
- Leave No Trace guidelines say your dishwashing site should be how many feet from streams, lakes, or rivers?
 - 100
 - 200
 - 200, downwind from camp
 - 300
- The difference between a true north line and the direction that a magnetic compass needle points is called ____?
- The first thing to fail on a tent is usually the:
 - zipper
 - pole
 - stake
 - floor
- "*Smellable items*" or things with an odor that could entice a bear to enter your tent, include everything except:
 - dried salmon
 - gorp
 - sunscreen
 - dirty socks
 - Wet Wipes
- When planning a route, expect to travel no faster than:
 - 10 miles per day
 - The slowest hiker in your group
 - 2 miles per hour
 - Your Scoutmaster

18. In order to earn a Backpacking merit badge, which of the following is not required?
- Demonstrate two ways to treat water and explain why this is essential
 - Describe a good campsite
 - Do a solo overnight at Philmont Scout Ranch in New Mexico
 - Plan and go on a five-day, 30-mile backpacking trip
19. Consult a doctor if a tick has been embedded in your skin longer than:
- one minute
 - 12 hours
 - 24 hours
 - 3 days
20. True or False? A hybrid tent is one that was made by two different designers.
21. The best way to assure your drinking water is safe is to:
- boil it
 - sip only the water you brought from home
 - filter it
 - add iodine
22. True or False? If you apply ice to a snakebite, it will hurt less and heal faster.
23. For any trek, your pack should weigh no more than ____ percent of your body weight.
24. Which is warmer on a winter backpacking trip: a tent or a snowcave?
25. True or false? New studies show that bear spray, if applied to your clothes and backpack two hours before hiking, is the most effective way to ward off grizzlies.
26. A person suffering from heat exhaustion can take ____ (12-24 or 24-48) hours to recover.
27. Which of the following is not part of the Boy Scout Oath:
- to help other people at all times
 - to be physically strong
 - to be morally straight
 - to be clean shaven always
 - to be mentally awake

ANSWERS

Consult the *Backpacking* merit badge book (\$5: scoutstuff.org) for more detail

- c
- True (*The metal frame absorbs the charge and directs it into the ground.*)
- c
- The manual says 40 and 60, but avalanche experts say 30 to 45. (*Give yourself a point for either answer.*)
- c
- c
- a (*Remember: Red and yellow, deadly fellow. Red and black, friendly Jack.*)
- Frostnip
- b
- d
- c
- False
- b
- declination
- a (*After every few trips, vacuum the zipper to remove dirt and debris.*)
- d
- c
- c
- c
- False
- b (*It says so on page 81.*)
- False (*Ice may damage skin and tissue.*)
- 25
- Snowcave
- False
- 26.12-24
- d

SCORE

Give yourself 1 point for each correct answer.

<10 points: The Webelos have 50,000 troops and 1.6 million members. There has to be a pack near you.

11-20 points: Congratulations! You've earned a pair of poly/cotton Boy Scout shorts!

21-27 points: Next stop, Eagle Scout