

Fast Start Reflections

Based on a Decade with LDS 11 Year Old New Scout Patrols

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I have spent about a decade as the adult advisor to my troop's new scout patrol. This is what I think is helpful for a new leader to know. This rambles a bit, but by the end it should all make sense. Some of my specific calendar items have changed, but what matters are the principles.

Aims & Methods. What these notes do not really address are the three aims (goals or ends) and the eight methods (or means) employed by scouting. They are explained in the scoutmaster handbook. The Aims and Methods tell you that the outdoor program, adult role models, boy leadership, ideals like the scout law, advancement, the uniform, etc. are just the means that we use to achieve the ends of character, citizenship and fitness (moral and physical). Once you feel up to speed in a couple months, remember to get a scoutmaster handbook and go through the aims and methods to better understand them.

But in the end, it is all about the boys. One of my scoutmasters failed to implement several of the scouting methods very well. But two boys just older than me went on missions and married in the temple, and are the only members of their family to do so, only because he intervened in their lives. I don't think this can be taken as a license to ignore the tools that we have been given – my mother in law who grew up in the church married a non-member who has now served in a temple presidency, but that does not mean she wanted her children to likewise buck the odds and marry out of the church. But I do try to remember this experience as a lesson that the methods are in fact just the means to an end. And that the most important of the eight methods can be adult role models.

The New Scout Patrol / Blazers. Blazers is the name used for the 11 year old new scout patrol back when I was a kid and no one but the LDS Church separated first year Scouts from the older boys. In most troops new boys graduate out of the new scout patrol and join a regular patrol when they either earn their First Class rank or at the end of two years, whichever occurs first. In LDS troops they graduate out when they turn 12.

A troop of patrols is like a league of teams. One-team leagues are not much fun, and neither are one-patrol troops. Each patrol has a Patrol Leader (PL). In many troops the Senior Patrol Leader (SPL) is not elected by the boys at large, he is elected by the patrol leaders since he will not usually be telling individual boys what to do – he will be telling patrol leaders what to do, and they in turn will make assignments to the individual boys in their patrols.

In Carrollton the youth of all three wards meet in the same building at the same time on Wednesday nights. Twice a month the boys all open together in the Primary room, the Blazers from all three wards as one or two patrols (depending on the numbers), each ward's Deacons as a patrol with a patrol leader (generally the quorum president), and even the older boys (one of whom will generally function as the senior patrol leader). All three wards camp together, although different age groups often camp separately. While each ward has its own troop on paper at the council office, they really operate in many respects as a single troop. The most important thing this accomplishes is aggregating enough boys to have multiple patrols. This allows us to channel the boys' energy into competition (for example, they then nag each other to learn something as they review before the relay that will occur in 10 minutes, rather than the adults nagging the kids to pay attention so they can pass of a requirement). It also greatly reduces the burden on adult leaders, since 1 adult from each ward still meets the youth protection guidelines, and individual adults can miss a couple times a year without wreaking havoc on the calendar. Don't expect three group encampments a year to suddenly produce ongoing patrol spirit. I have not exactly offered a solution here for the 3 boy troop, but this is an understanding that I think all scout leaders should have so that those with at 6 boys can make a more intelligent use of their two patrols.

Boy Leadership. Done right, the patrol method means a scoutmaster takes on a huge time commitment. He meets with the patrol leader for 30-60 minutes to plan the presidency meeting. Then he attends while the president runs the presidency meeting. Then he attends the Sunday lesson, weeknight meetings and monthly outings. And before any of this can happen, he has some serious planning of his own to do on at least three levels: planning and executing the calendar; worrying about the welfare of the boys; and teaching his president how to teach his counselors - and all three of these topics require both big picture thought and weekly detail planning. This is huge. But I believe it is the ideal. I also believe it is a prerequisite to that statement we sometimes hear that someday the deacons and teachers quorum presidents will be as esteemed as the elders quorum president.

As a Blazer leader, however, I do the calendar and most of the meeting planning. Then, when things go as they should, I meet with the patrol leader for a half hour each week and go over the next meeting so that he can run most of it. I let the patrol leader make suggestions, especially about the games, but I do not put on him the burden of answering the question "What do you want to do?" In my experience, he does not know what there is that can be done, nor what needs to be done, nor how long each activity is likely to last as each meeting is planned. I also have to teach him the concept of stopping an activity while it is still fun, or not repeating it too often, so the boys will want to do it again. Otherwise we would play crows and cranes every week until it was no longer any fun, and then their last memory of it would be that they are tired of it. BSA says that ideally the patrol leaders and senior patrol leader will annually sit down, review the last year's program, brainstorm, and plan the next year's program. In the case of Blazers especially, I would point out that none of them have seen the entire prior year that they are supposed to critique, that the more of it they have seen the less of it they will still be around for next year, and that they are not age 13-16 like the leadership of an ideal

troop since all of the older boys have already graduated out. So I hand my patrol leader the program, and I think he spends enough time and energy for an 11 year old just trying to think about how to execute it and occasionally suggest changes, mostly to the games and pre-opening.

Blazers is for Basic Skills. I start from the premise that in the first year the boys need to get down all of the basic skills. In Blazers they can learn scout skills every week. Once they turn 12 and join the youth program, they will have a lot less time to spend on those basic skills with a monthly joint activity, any time spent on service or merit badges, etc. Bottom line: I think I have as much time to spend on scout skills in my one year of Blazers as the Deacons advisor has in two years. Blazer meeting night time becomes valuable in this regard when you realize that it will take a Deacons advisor twice as long to make up anything I skip. With regard to campout time, the opposite is true, and it is the Deacons who have many more overnight campouts.

Difference Between First Class Requirements & Advanced Rank Requirements. I strongly oppose just walking boys through advancement to Eagle. The boys need to feel that they have in fact earned their awards. They will not value or be proud of badges that required no sacrifice, and they need to learn certain things (such as following up with adults they do not know very well) in the course of their scouting career, and they will not learn those things if all they have to do is show up. I therefore have mixed feelings about merit badge workshops, and I feel that at least some tough badges should be earned outside of that setting. I feel better about workshops for activity-based badges such as archery or swimming where the boys must physically perform to a standard or learn a skill and feel that they have done so, not just learn and repeat information sitting indoors.

But none of what I have just said applies to Blazers. Back when we still had skill awards (more basic than merit badges and needed only through First Class), a scout leader that I respect taught about advancement and the outdoor program with the following story. He saw one of his boys cooking lunch over the fire, so he went up and asked him some questions about his cooking and cleanup activities over the last day, and then he just handed the boy a cooking skill award. The boy had no idea that he had been earning a badge, he thought he had just been participating in the outdoor program. Now, boys should be encouraged to care enough about advancement that they have some sense of what they need to accomplish for their next rank. But I also think the requirements for First Class should just happen naturally in the course of the Blazer program. In fact, I think the current set of First Class requirements that we have had now for the last couple decades is designed to force scout leaders to deliver the “adventure” program their boys expect when they join – by forcing the leaders to regularly provide all of the activities that are required to earn First Class. In my annual program plan, I try to cover all Tenderfoot and Second Class requirements three times a year and all First Class requirements twice a year. When the boys say “Haven’t we already done this?” I say “Yes, you have. But Johnny hasn’t. Why don’t you teach him.”

Repeatable One-Year Plan. Blazers are only in the program for one year. So even though I repeat the same program every year, it is still fresh for the new boys who have not yet seen it. Once I have figured out what the best 12 monthly activities are, why would I consciously do something else just to avoid repetition? In fact, by repeating the same Blazer activities every year, I give the older scouts in the troop a shared experience just like everyone who has ever been through army boot camp or the MTC. After doing this for about 7 of the last 10 years, I now repeat about 10-11 activities each year and try 1-2 new ones in an attempt to still gradually improve the program. Our Deacons scoutmaster similarly has a two year outline that includes a few annual outings like summer camp and the January orienteering meet, but mostly bi-annual outings. The Teachers and Priests share a four year outline (the older boys can choose to make changes, but it provides a starting point). So the overall program repeats every four years, although it is experienced by the boys as a seven year program.

Monthly Program Concept. Another premise from which I start is that the ideal program has weekly meetings that lead up to and prepare the boys for their monthly outing. It is much easier to engage the boys about the rules of safe hiking if they know that they will soon be going on a hike. (And it is easier still to engage the boys about almost any discussion item during the first 2 miles of a 5 mile hike, so begin those hikes prepared with material). Tell the boys what the monthly activity is, tell them weeks in advance what you will be covering each week as they get ready, and they will have a better attitude about the instructional parts of weeknight meetings, and you will get better attendance on your campout. So I generally start by planning the monthly activities and then worry about the weekly meetings after. This is most important for map skills, compass skills, lashings, and especially the First Class cooking requirements where you will spend half a weekly meeting planning the menu and another weekly meeting going to the grocery store and buying the food.

Courts of Honor. Another premise is that you should have “four quarts” (or Courts) of Honor per year. Three is probably okay also. One after summer camp. Another after the advancement day workshops in late November that our district puts on. One or two in the spring.

Save the Best (High Adventure) for Last (Exploring). Another premise is that, when Blazers go rappelling, Teachers lose interest in Scouting. My Blazers only get three overnights (plus the ward father-son) each year, and we always camp next to the car with a cooler. Deacons get to go every month and hike in to camp with backpacks about half the time, even if they only go a quarter mile. Teachers get to go backpacking from campsite to campsite. Whenever the Blazers do a 5 mile hike at Sid Richardson, I point out from near the gazebo how cool it would be to canoe out to Steele Island. I then tell them that Blazers don't do that, but they should bug the Deacon's scoutmaster next year to go do that. I have always pushed strongly to make sure that we hold some things back like that, even when it is my own boy who is too young to go on the annual weekend canoe trip with the Deacons.

After all, we do not lose many boys at age 11. We sometimes lose families that have 11 year old boys, but we are not losing the individual boys at this age. So Blazers is not primarily for retaining boys through a difficult age. Blazers is the first time that we can recruit a less active boy into the program by promising campouts, fires, woodchopping, etc., and in my experience that is about all that we have to deliver at that age for them to remain excited. But Blazers should be told, ideally by the older boys, that the adventures get better as they graduate into the Deacons and then into the Teachers quorums. Blazers is also the first time that boys really get to know any adult men from the ward, and I think this can have a big influence on their developing a feeling of fitting into the larger adult ward. So, in my opinion, Blazers is about getting boys into the program so that, by the time they become Teachers, they have spent the last three years thinking that at least a couple adult men in the ward are cool and worth being like, building bonds of fellowship with those men and the other boys in their age group, and looking forward to going on the Teachers outings – all so that the Teachers quorum has a better chance of retaining boys at an age when we do in fact lose many individual boys. So again, I feel strongly that Blazers need to be given enough adventure to get them into and excited about the program, but also that you must hold back enough that they will still have something to look forward to as a Deacon, and then even something more as a Teacher.

Scouting for Priests – Maybe Not. As for Priests, my personal opinion is that they rarely need, and often will not tolerate, the method of Scouting as the means to affect their lives. By that age they have seen people they know at school already mess up their lives, they can see the time when they will leave home to live on their own and/or go to college, they will directly ask serious questions about how to get through life happily, and they will seriously listen if you will just give them straight answers from a big brother who has been through this just a little ahead of them. In addition, they are dating, often have demanding extracurricular activities at school, and many of them also have the additional demands of a part time job. My experience is that Deacons are easy to please on weeknights but difficult to teach on Sunday, while Priests are practically begging for good Sunday lessons but difficult to attract on weeknights. So the Priests are welcome to tag along with the Teachers on some cool outings, and fellowship can still be a powerful tool, but I personally do not stress over Scouting at that age. I worry more about Seminary attendance and whether they have friendships as equals with adults in the ward. There is a story about an old lady who doesn't realize that the nice man in the ward who is always helping her is actually doing his home teaching. In the same way, I don't care if the Priests go mountain biking on Saturday as a planned activity, or if they just tag along with a couple of the cool adults in the ward who happen to also be their advisors.

Swimming Merit Badge & Summer Camp. The last concept that I will lay out before addressing implementation is that I strongly believe a boy should already have his swimming merit badge when he goes to summer camp in June as a 12 year old. Summer camp is a key part of the “adventure” program that he expects from scouting. Don't waste uniquely valuable time that could be spent there in a canoe doing something that could have been done back home in a swimming pool (many boys don't want to do the swimming merit badge in a lake or river anyway). They can take

rowboating MB their second year. As a Teacher they can do sailboating or BSA lifeguard, or better yet go do some high adventure. So this means that I cover the swimming MB as part of my annual program. (At one point I had only two Blazers from different wards who were not natural friends, so we kept working on stroke instruction all summer long since they did at least enjoy that). We swim most Wednesday nights during May-June at the Standridge indoor pool in Carrollton, preferably in a lane next to the wall so you can watch and talk to the boys at all times about how they are doing. We then finish up with a couple nights in a backyard pool for the rescues, inflation, etc.

Most people can teach the boys how to do back crawl. But find someone in your ward who has done serious lap swimming. Have them watch the boys and, as they see things, stop individual boys to give them pointers or specific things to work on. For one boy, what made sidestroke finally click was doing several lengths of the pool with the outstretched hand holding onto a kickboard. Someone who has spent hundreds of hours swimming laps will see and suggest things like that. And let him assign homework like practicing surface dives or lifesaving entries. Even most kids who have swimming pools in their back yards will make significant improvement with the benefit of one on one stroke instruction. At the other end of the spectrum, some boys will spend half their time pulled out of the main swimming activity for one on one coaching in a separate lane and still not become strong swimmers at the end of a couple months. But they will make more progress toward becoming able to pass off the requirements, and acquire more self confidence, if you attack the underlying problem instead of letting them fail the swimmer test and get banned from the canoes at summer camp. What the Deacons do about swimming varies each year based upon how well those boys did as Blazers. Sometimes a Deacon comes back to swim with us for a second year if he really needs the help and the other boys his age already swim well and have already earned the swimming MB.

Planning the Annual Plan. As for actual planning, I break the year into long, warm summer nights and cold, short winter nights. I do not think of my year from January to December, but from October to September or from March to February. (For Deacons who camp overnight most months, in the cold months we try to find places close in where we can just get there before it gets too dark, while in the warm months we drive further for better locations).

Five of my twelve monthly outings, including three of the four overnights, are already planned for me. So, before anything gets planned specifically for my Blazers, my calendar already looks like this:

Oct Stake Blazer overnighter (O/N)
 Nov District (Carrollton) merit badge workshop
 Dec
 Jan
 Feb Scouting for Food
 Mar District (Carrollton) camporee (O/N or overnighter) (3 years out of 4, I dislike Fin n Fun)
 Apr
 May Ward Father-Son Campout (O/N) and maybe Council Scout Show (Circle Ten)
 June
 July
 Aug
 Sep

Now I need to figure out how I am going to fit in 3 five-mile hikes and 1 or 2 one-mile orienteering courses. Another requirement that can end up requiring actual planning is animal identification. If I plug these things in at regular intervals, my calendar now looks like this:

Oct Stake Blazer overnighter (O/N) – basic skills with compasses, fire & woods tools, lashings
 Nov District (Carrollton) merit badge workshop
 Dec Hills & Hollows (O/N) – topographic map skills
 Jan Camp James Ray – annual NTOA orienteering meet with 1+ mile orienteering course
 Feb Scouting for Food & “Limefest” catapult lashing activity
 Mar District (Carrollton) camporee (O/N or overnighter)
 Apr 5 mile hike
 May Ward Father-Son Campout (O/N) and Council Scout Show (Circle Ten)
 Jun totenchup and hot dogs at Lake Grapevine or Lake Lewisville
 Jul
 Aug 1 mile orienteering course
 Sep 5 mile hike (heat usually breaks about Sep 15)

My calendar is now almost full, although I do still have to come up with some locations. Notice that I have had the most trouble filling in June and July. For me, summer just abounds with possibilities for the older boys, but for Blazers summer is the hardest part of the year to plan. Some notes:

Compass, Map & Orienteering. I personally do not care whether a boy is so precise with his compass that he can distinguish between a reading of 330° and 335°. I have often had to figure out where I was in the mountains, and it has never come down to that. What really matters is that you be good enough to figure out where you are, orient your map, identify on your map the mountains that you see, and figure out which trail to follow or which landmark to hike toward cross country. After all, you have never worried about whether you were headed north on I-35E at a bearing of 330° or 335°

as you left downtown; it was enough to know that you were headed a little bit west of due north. So I do not get out that game where you put a row of 20 stakes on a grassy field and try to see if you can land exactly on the right one. What I do instead is the following sequence.

The stake Blazer overnighter was held last year in October at the YMCA's Camp Tsunganai on Lake Lewisville. It is an ideal location for teaching compass skills. We begin by learning our pace. (This should be done several times over the course of the year so that the boys come to instinctively know their pace; this is easy to do on Wednesday nights since parking lot stripes are usually 10' apart). We then learn how to find a bearing on the compass. We then go through a sequence of about 30 points where I give out the distance and bearing to the point. Because Tsunganai (behind the chapel) has a web of trails with intersections every 50 feet or so, the boys can do this 30 times in 90 minutes and really get the skill down, and they also learn that it does not matter if they are off by 5°, they just have to be able to recognize which trail is correct.

In December we do the First Class map requirements before going to Hills & Hollows in Denton.

This means the boys spend most of their time figuring out how to use their compasses, not walking from point to point. can y that at means the boys can For the orienteering course, there are many places you can go. The simplest choice is Camp Wisdom (Circle Ten) in Duncanville. Other good, close choices include Hickory Creek (Lake Lewisville north west of lake and I-35), Camp Burnett, and Cedar Hills Park at Joe Pool Lake in Duncanville. You can lay them out easily enough with a series of 3-4-5 triangles.

Contour Map Course. The contour map activity is something that I dreamed up since getting a map of Hills & Hollows (Longhorn) with 10 foot intervals from an architect who is also a scout. The camp is small, but across its 660' width you go down and back up 80'. The contours on the map can really be recognized by the boys. I set out 15-20 ribbons, put dots on the maps where the pins are located, and tell the boys to go find all the dots. Each ribbon has 1 to 4 dots on a piece of surveyor ribbon, and the first pair of boys to return with the correct total wins. I have to range over the camp helping them read the map, but by the end of a couple hours they have it figured out and know that they have learned something.

Five Mile Hikes. For the 5 mile hikes, you want a large area that is not too boring. The two obvious solutions are the two flagship camps of about 3,000 acres each (most summer camps are only about 300 acres): Sid Richardson in Longhorn Council and Clements in Circle Ten Council. Clements is southeast with lots of piney cover, so I often go there in September when it is hotter. Sid Richardson is west with prickly pear, yucca, mesquite and a lot less cover in most of the camp, so I go there in April when it is pleasant and still green. For the December hike, I think I was very clever in deciding to do a city hike. We go to the Denton County courthouse at 9:00, use a city map for downtown, head

over to UNT, go into four of the more cool buildings (auditorium, student union, administration, library), get back to the courthouse and go upstairs for the noon bell ringing, try to open the safe downstairs (one boy did it twice), and then go across the street where I buy lunch at the Denton County Hamburger Factory (greasy and yummy). There are also trails at Lake Grapevine, the Rockledge Trail on the north shore east, another less bicycled trail on the north shore west. There may also be hiking at Lake Ray Roberts north of Denton, but I am not sure.

Animal Identification. There are two places that For animal identification, Tishomingo Nat'l Wildlife Refuge is guaranteed to show you lots of animals. It may be worth the drive to the north shore of Lake Texoma if you combine it with an orienteering course, but do not bother camping there overnight, and avoid hunting season. I was also happy with the Fort Worth Nature Center at the NE corner of Loop 820 in Fort Worth and will probably continue to go there instead (buffalo herd, prairie dog town, lizards, beaver lodge, and only half credit for each caged animal in the interpretive center). The boardwalk is funky, and it is even cheap (\$2/boy) to hire a guide who can actually recognize the beaver lodges for you. Another advantage is that it is only a few minutes from Camp Leroy Shuman (Longhorn Council), a 50 acre camp also on Lake Worth.

Campfire Stories. Use campfires to talk about church history or scripture stories. Don't waste this valuable time on snipe hunts and ghost stories. Boys can be unusually receptive at this time if you can get the precedent established and have your second adult keep the boys under control while the first talks.

Weekly Meetings -the gimme's. As for the weekly meetings, we spend two weeks before each overnight campout going through the First Class food requirements. We spend a lot of time in the winter doing map and compass work for the December - February outings. We spend time before the March camporee and October stake Blazer campout reviewing firebuilding and lashings. We spend most of our meetings in June and July in the pool. For the flag raising stuff we go to the Coppell fire station on MacArthur north of Beltline - the trip takes just about an hour. Getting through the physical tests (Tenderfoot 10) can also eat up most of a meeting every month.

I generally start by planning the monthly activities and then worry about the weekly meetings after. This is most important for the following: map skills, compass skills, and especially the First Class cooking requirements where you will spend half a weekly meeting planning the menu and another weekly meeting going to the grocery store and buying the food.

Remember that boys really do want structure, or at least the results of structure. They will fight the rules, but if you give in they will tire of the anarchy and quit coming.

Quarterly Review. Otherwise, at about each court of honor I sit down and review what each boy needs to progress to the next rank. I have two pages front and back for each boy that go in my

planner. I then figure out how to fit those into our meetings before the next court of honor and outline the “lesson objectives” for each meeting. (I also have worked up notes with the answers to all of the First Class and Swimming MB requirements that I do not already know really well, and these are also in my planner. I find that this is about all I need to work up my calendar any time, anywhere.) This can be seen as giving each boy the opportunity to move up a rank by the next court of honor if they show up and participate. This can also be seen as a list of what BSA considers this boy should next be exposed to in the course of delivering the program that BSA has promised him.

Weekly Meetings - the underlying theory. As for running a particular weekly meeting, the most important thing to remember is that 11 year old boys quickly become bored, or at least distracted. Give them lots of short activities, with some of them being active. The following is my ideal meeting outline.

7:00 preopening game - jump the rope, throw hackysacks at each other, etc
7:15 opening - prayer, pledge, oath, law, announcements, remind of next activity, etc.
7:20 skill teaching - this is your main information session and is often run by an adult
7:40 game - should be active to get out the wiggles
7:50 patrol meeting - plan menu, review for competition, etc.
8:00 inter-patrol competition
8:10 closing - prayer, scoutmaster minute, review of what done, reminders
8:15 dismiss

This is just a starting point and usually gets adjusted based on what we are doing that week. When we do lashings it takes the whole meeting, but that is okay because it is hands on so the boys do not get as bored as they would with the rights and obligations of citizenship.

Where to go from here. Training. Roundtable. Woodbadge (experience it). Feedback and self-critique.

MISCELLANEOUS NOTES

I often hand out a wacky certificate to each boy at each court of honor that reflects something he did with the group since the last court of honor.

On my charts I track the patrol outings by date and camp, and I circle the overnights. The dates and camps for the overnights will be important later on for the camping MB which is required for Eagle and for elections to Order of the Arrow.

For the Safe Swim Defense and Safe Trip Afloat memorizations, I have taught my boys two stupid songs that nevertheless do improve memory.