

STARTING FROM SCRATCH Part 1 of 3 by Art Collins

Over the years, I have started or re-launched seven units: a Cub Pack, three Scout Troops, an Explorer Post, and two Venturing Crews. In each case, we started with nothing. No money in the bank, no gear, and (frequently) no youth or adults other than myself with any Scouting experience. Now, if your model of a successful unit is the big, thriving unit with lots of money, lots of stuff, and lots of trained leaders (youth and adult), this can be daunting. You may think the first thing you have to do is – EVERYTHING. And the fun and magic of Scouting can be neglected as you scramble to try to acquire the assets (financial, material, and human) that other units have spent years building up.

But you don't have to stress out about that, and you don't have to delay the fun and magic in order to chase after what you don't yet have. If you're starting a new unit with nothing, that's an opportunity, not a burden. You are free to make it your own. (Note that the "your" in "your own" is plural – as in, yours together, youth and adults, not just yours as the unit leader.) So, how do you do this?

NO MONEY

So, the first thing we need to do is a fund-raiser, right? Yeah, that's the very definition of fun in a kid's eyes. Or an adult's. Yuck. Let me put this as strongly as I can: You can't spell Funds without Fun. Put the fun first. Put the adventure first. Hook the kids on your program before you give them a fundraiser to do. Then they'll be more willing to work for more of what the program has to offer.

This means that you need to find cheap things to do that they can pay for out of pocket, or bring bag lunches along to: things that take minimal gear, stuff they probably already have at home (more on this in the next part). A brand-new troop needs to get outdoors and do something in its first six weeks! Don't put off the fun!

Be sensitive to the sticker shock of Scouting. Even affluent families raise an eyebrow at the initial price tag of joining a troop: registration, uniforming, handbook, dues (not to mention personal gear, which we'll talk about in the next part). Make your own fun, don't buy it off the rack; for instance, if you've got snow on the ground, build snow forts and go sledding. That's a lot cheaper than going skiing at 75 bucks per lift ticket, plus ski rental, optional lessons, and eating out at the lodge. Remember, you've got a brand-new unit with brand-new families. You have to prove the worth of your program before asking them to shell out even more of their hard-earned money.

Set a reasonable Dues rate, and use it for things like awards. The basic income from dues should all be returned to the Scouts in the form of badges and program materials (you'd be surprised how many fun things you can do with balloons). Fundraisers are for trips and gear.

When you do plan a fundraiser, keep in mind that all youth orgs, including the schools, do product sales. I hate product sales. Scout Popcorn is probably the best one, and it's mostly organized for you, so by all means, sell popcorn. You probably need one other, maybe two other fundraisers, to keep your program perking. If popcorn is in the fall, then do a winter fundraiser and a spring one. No more, at least not with the small unit starting from scratch, or you'll be doing more fundraising than fun-raising.

Being the chef type, I always liked foody fundraisers. Host a dinner, sell hot dogs at a festival, whatever. Take advantage of your relationship with your charter partner. You don't have to try to reach the

general public with a chili dinner or a pancake breakfast. You can work with the charter partner to do this as part of their program, and their members will form a ready-made customer base for you. A couple of times, I even had Crews do gourmet meals by invitation, at which I told the diners to pay us whatever they thought the meal was worth – or whatever they thought the trip we were taking that summer was worth for which the meal was raising funds. If you take “price” out of the equation and elicit “support,” you’d be surprised how much people will do.

Many units separate out some of their profits from fundraisers into youth accounts, according to how much each Scout worked. These are not the Scouts’ personal property (there are IRS rules that you can run afoul of here), but they are reserved to help the Scouts pay for the big events the unit plans. “A Scout works to pay one’s way” is the explanation of THRIFTY. But be aware also of campership sources available to you. No Scout should be deprived of a major experience just because his or her parents can’t afford the whole price of it.

Keep in mind that you cannot solicit money donations directly (IRS rules, again), but your charter partner probably can. The charter partner should pay the basic charter fee each year, to demonstrate their ownership of the unit. Sometimes, charter partners starting a new unit will budget an amount for startup costs (hey, you can ask). If someone DOES make a donation to you, have the charter partner acknowledge it with a letter (legally, the donation was given to them to pass along to you).

By the way, all the miles you drive as an adult leader are tax-deductible. Likewise, if you buy program materials for which you are not reimbursed, those may count as in-kind donations to your charter partner (it’s their unit, remember?). It all adds up, so keep good records for yourself.

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STARTING FROM SCRATCH, PART 2 of 3 by Art Collins

Okay, so you've got a brand-new unit with brand-new Scouts. Fun City! But you also have no accumulated assets. No tents, no cooking gear, no water jugs, no axes, no rope barrel, no merit badge books. How will you deliver the program? Well, as the friendly green letters on the cover of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* say, "Don't panic."

NO GEAR

You don't have to hold up on the adventure just because you don't have any stuff, or a wad of cash to buy it. You can start right where you are. You can take kids on an adventure – the Scout Way.

First of all, teach them all the cool stuff about building fires and cooking on them. You don't need chemical stoves if you've got wood or charcoal. For that matter, "utensiless cooking" doesn't have to be just a stunt or a sign-off for advancement. You can do it for real, and it's good eating. When I was a boy, my troop hated doing dishes. We all decided to become expert in primitive cooking, so we didn't have to clean up as much. And since wood fires were what we cooked every meal on, we also learned quickly about soaping the bottom of pans to make them easier to clean.

Not only that, but you can still find plans in old Scout books about how to make your own cooking gear out of tin cans. They are food-grade safe and just as good as the fancy stuff that costs the big bucks. Making your own can be an enjoyable activity in troop meetings.

As for tents, sleeping under the stars (a.k.a. "meadow-crashing") is still recognized by BSA – and still just as fun as it ever was. For rainy possibilities, you can use cheap ripstop nylon tarps from Walmart for both ground cloth and covering. Not to toot my own troop's horn, but we boys back in the late '60s also didn't like schlepping around our troop's tents. All we had were the big ol' canvas tents with wooden poles. So we bought a bunch of plastic sheeting and created our own shelters to our own designs. To keep from punching holes in plastic that will tear out (there being no grommets to attach lines to), put a coin or pebble in the corner, then scrunch the material around the object. Tie a light line (e.g., binder twine) around the neck thus created using two half hitches, and stretch the other end to a stake. And there you have it. You can make anything you can imagine. You can also use big ol' army ponchos and show them how to make a Vietnam-era "hooch."

As you go along, budget some of your unit income for new gear. After a while, budget for gear maintenance and repair. Eventually, you will have all the best stuff you can imagine, though you may still bring out the old primitive stuff just for fun. DO NOT, as I saw one group do in a unit organizing meeting years ago, start out by discussing how to raise money to buy a fershlugginer trailer. Show some self-respect and learn how to camp first, for heaven's sake.

When it comes time to invest in gear, look for the stuff that will last. Also, look for sales and discounts in places like Campmor and REI. Decide on a design that you like and that has been around a while, so you can buy more later to the same pattern as your unit grows and gear wears out.

Keep in mind, too, that there are two major styles of camping. "Jamboree" camping uses all the heavy stuff and plants itself down as if you were going to stay a week. It takes a lot of space to store and to haul. "Trail" camping emphasizes minimum impact and light weight and is ready to move on an hour's

notice. You may not be taking 11-year-olds backpacking yet, but until you get around to investing in wooden patrol boxes and cast iron cookware, you might make a virtue out of a necessity and emphasize having a light footprint.

Just as your unit starts with no gear, so every kid who joins your unit starts with no gear, unless his family is already a camping lot. Scouting being expensive to start with – registration, uniform, handbook, and dues can be a big bite right off – you need to be able to counsel parents about the minimum needs to go camping.

Good boots are essential for hiking and backpacking. Yes, kids grow, sometimes very fast, so parents may not want to plunk down too much for a pair of feet covers; however, a truly active program will require good footwear.

Backpacks are important, but not so much right off. A good day pack, with a belly belt, is good enough for day hiking; add a duffel bag to hold overnight gear, and you're ready for anything short of a backpacking trip. When it does come time to buy the first backpack, I always counsel parents to go for an external frame pack. Outdoor stores will always try to steer you to the internal frame packs, because they're what the cool kids use – and they're MORE EXPENSIVE. But they're also more difficult to pack correctly, and you can make yourself miserable carrying an incorrectly-packed internal frame pack. Get a nice, inexpensive youth backpack with a lightweight external frame for that first backpacking trip.

Sleeping bags are kind of essential, too, though teaching kids how to make a bedroll can be fine. (When I go to summer camp to sleep in a cot all week, I usually don't take a sleeping bag. I prefer sheets and a blanket. It's more comfortable, and what with the humid Indiana summers, I can still stand to crawl into the same sheets at the end of the week.) A 3-season bag will do for most purposes. Any design will do, though an active troop which will eventually go backpacking will necessitate a stuffable one.

Beyond that, you don't need much. Eatin' irons (cup, bowl, spoon) can be cadged from home. A litre-sized soda bottle is as good as a Nalgene water bottle. Lots of stuff can be improvised. I tell parents to look ahead to birthdays and Christmas as opportunities to build up your Scout's camping gear in a steady way. Grandparents can help in that way, too. The object is to *get out there*, not fuss over having all the right-looking stuff.

As for uniforms, I'm all for them, even as I recognize that they're expensive. I always emphasized "full uniforming" (that means pants, too), but I didn't bludgeon people with it. My most important statement was how *I* was dressed: I was always in complete and correct uniform, to give the Scouts an example to follow. You can sometimes get old uniform parts from other units or from thrift stores. As your unit goes along, encourage parents to donate shirts and pants and so on to the unit. After they're cleaned (and sometimes, mended), you can sell them to any kid who needs them for a dollar per piece.

Designing a troop t-shirt for camp wear is also a way of keeping uniforms from wearing out too soon due to hard use. A \$10 t-shirt is a lot cheaper than a \$40+ uniform shirt, and it doesn't need patches, either. At campouts and service projects, you all look like you belong together, too.

The bottom line is, don't obsess over all the stuff you don't have. Learn to "improvise, adapt, overcome." Don't wait until you have all the stuff some other unit has. Learn to have fun right away, and then it will always be fun. And remember that other old Scout saying:

THREE-QUARTERS OF "SCOUTING" IS "OUTING."

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STARTING FROM SCRATCH, Part 3 of 3 by Art Collins

Last in a series: You've just started a brand-new unit. None of your new Scouts has ever been a Scout before (other than, say, Cubs). And among the parents and other adults who are interested, none has ever been in his or her current leadership position; certainly, nobody has been a Scoutmaster or Advisor before. Now what?

NO EXPERIENCE

Take heart. As President Lincoln said to his first Army commander, urging him to advance against the Confederates, "You are green, it is true; but they are green, also; you are green alike." The heart of the Scouting adventure is to do things you've never done before.

For adults, there are good training courses to give you and other adults the practical skills you may lack. The monthly Roundtable will give you a chance to network with other leaders on many topics. Just remember, the adults are there to keep things from jumping the rails, to solve logistical problems, and watch out for safety concerns. The Scouts are supposed to run their own troop or crew. Training them to do that is the unit leader's job.

One way to do that is to "frame the question." Let the Scouts get as far as they can with a problem or a process or a plan. Only when they get stuck should the leader try to offer direction. The best way to do that is by framing the question. Let's say a new patrol is supposed to plan a menu for its first campout. The Scouts are fiddling around, not getting it done. The problem is that none of them has ever planned a menu before, even for their families. They don't know how to start. So, the adult leader frames the question by asking, "Hot dogs or hamburgers?" Okay, they can make that decision. "What goes with that?" They know that. By framing the question in such a way that it is capable of being answered by youth of that age and experience level, you get them unstuck and set them free to complete the task and then go have the adventure.

At a much higher level, say you're planning a high adventure trip. Nobody knows what's even possible; they're all newbies at it. So, framing the question could be asking, "Mountains or seacoast?" "Backpacking or canoeing?" Succeeding questions about how many days they feel comfortable being gone and what price level for a trip they can imagine may be necessary. The point is not to plan it all and seek their assent; it is to equip them to choose their own adventures. Once they've had a few adventures at a given level, they will feel comfortable initiating new conversations: "Next time, I think we should . . ." Keep note of even their wildest ideas. Next time your PLC or Crew Executive Committee gets stuck, remind them of what has been suggested before. Nurture the ongoing conversation. Then teach your SPL or Crew President how to run a meeting so that he or she is bringing the group to that point instead of you.

A new patrol (or a new troop) may need to let each new Scout be the leader for an event or a meeting for a few weeks, so that everyone has a chance to try out the role of leader. This also gives the Scouts a chance to form an opinion of others' leadership. Then you can hold an election for youth leadership positions, and the normal processes of election and training and growth in leadership will work themselves out. Over time, you will develop a tradition in how to do things, and new Scouts will absorb it from the more experienced Scouts, and it will be easier to develop new leaders when they are not all "green alike."

A word about advancement might be in order here. Every requirement in the BSA advancement system is, in effect, a Behavioral Objective. At its heart is a performance, a behavior, that is required: *Tie this knot. Explain this symbol. Do this. Memorize and recite. Tell in your own words. Plan, organize, recruit.* These are all action words. AT NO POINT in the entire advancement system is any Scout told, "Understand this." Understanding is assumed, if the required actions are performed. This means that there is no requirement to learn something and then "understand it." Nor are there any re-checks for understanding. For that matter, there is no requirement that you should be able to replicate the behavior called for at any subsequent time. While we all hope you will be able to tie a square knot for ever after having learned it, if you can tie it once, all by yourself, you have passed the requirement.

I mention this because there is a deadly tendency to turn Scouting into "school in the woods" – or worse, "school in the church basement." Scouting is about DOING, not sitting around holding class. Baden-Powell thought the best way to teach things is to involve youth in doing them. You learn morals by doing good deeds, not by studying moral codes; you learn camping skills by camping, not by book study. And so on. Scouting is a GAME, he said. Education and character formation are its goals, but its method is to have fun (in the right way). So, let's say we're going on a hike (required action). While on the hike, I say, "Let's have a contest to see how many trees we can identify" (or signs of animals we can identify). These are also requirements. It's a game. At first, the Scouts aren't very good at it. So you teach them what a sycamore looks like. Now, they can't pass the requirement just by identifying what you showed them, but as you walk along, one will say, "Hey, there's another sycamore!" And he has just ticked one off his list. Someone else says, "Can that one count for me, too?" No, you reply, you have to find another sycamore. But the point is, there's no reason why someone can't learn trees and pass tree identification on the same day. As long as the Scout is actually identifying the tree, and not just parroting your identification, he's passing the requirement.

Likewise, I've seen a lot of troops plan all kinds of fun stuff on a campout. But then someone says, "I need to pass requirement X." But passing that requirement means stopping the fun to do school-in-the-woods, so you tell him, "well, you study up on it, and we'll check you off next time." No, NO **NO**. Plan your activities around the things the Scouts need to be doing. Have fun doing them. Instead of teaching them lashings as if they were useless skills learned just to tick off meaningless requirements, go out and build things with rope and spars. Let them be surprised at how much they've learned when it comes time to examine their Handbooks and bring their records up to date at the next meeting. They should be learning new things without knowing that they're learning them. And it should all be FUN.

Don't just have them memorize our watchwords. Quote them to the Scouts. "What's our Motto, Billy?" "Uh, 'Be prepared'?" "Right. So, who's got (something they were all told to bring) in his pocket so we can play the next game?" Or, "Come on, guys. 'A Scout is cheerful.' Never mind the rain. Put your best smile on and let's go have fun!" Or have an impromptu contest: "I've got an extra X for the first one who can tell me what the two stars in the Scout sign stand for!" Don't let the Scouting tradition be a thing of battered old books; make it live.

In playing the Scouting game the way it was meant to be played, in taking the Scouts out on adventures to discover their world and themselves in the midst of it, in keeping the initial watchwords before their mind's eye, you are making them into Scouts. And then they won't be green any more. And neither will you.