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'Never Give Up on a Scout'

By Thomas R. Welch

Illustration by Sanford Kossin

A young camp staff member agreed that an awkward Scout with a (very) annoying attitude was hopeless. Then they became canoeing partners.



As a college student, I worked at a small Scout camp in the northeast. Our program director, Frank, was a gnarled veteran of decades of Scout camping, who always seemed to have an anecdote or adage to stop us upstarts in our tracks.

Little did I know at the time how right he could be.

As new troops were checking in one Sunday in the middle of the camp season, word filtered throughout the staff: Dan Johnson was back.

Those of us who had been on staff in previous years knew Dan well. A chubby, awkward youth, he tried to overcome his physical failings with an annoying bravado that his friends, troop leaders - and camp staff - found difficult to take. He rarely had anything good to say about the camp, his troop, or Scouting in general.

It was hard to believe he had returned with his troop for another summer.

The Eagle can't swim

One thing had changed about Dan, however. A crisp, brand-new Eagle Scout badge adorned his otherwise rumpled uniform. This set many of my fellow staff members and me into a chorus of righteous indignation.

Both Swimming and Lifesaving merit badges were required for Eagle then, and we knew Dan had dramatically failed both during his previous summer at camp. During the winter, however, an instructor, apparently with less stringent standards than ours, had signed him off on both badges at an indoor pool.

As if to confirm our suspicions, Dan managed to fail the Sunday afternoon swimmer's test. Imagine, we all harrumphed, an Eagle Scout who could not pass the swimmer's test!

Behind his back, the staff began to refer to him derisively as "Eagle Scout Daniel Johnson." Even then, our displeasure was thinly disguised.

A burden to bear

It was my turn to lead a small crew of Scouts on a midweek canoe trip. The two-day outing called for us to canoe across Lake Placid, climb picturesque Whiteface Mountain, and camp overnight on the mountain.

Then I saw that the crew roster included the name of Eagle Scout Daniel Johnson.

Storming into Frank's disheveled office, I announced that there was no way I would include Daniel on such a trip.

"It's unsafe - he can't swim well!" I argued.

"Put him in your canoe," the veteran program director countered.

"He'll never be able to carry a pack up a mountain!" I pleaded.

"Help him," Frank insisted.

Realizing that the issue had become bigger than both of us, Frank called the staff together after dinner. He reminded us that a certain principle existed for such situations:

"Never give up on a Scout."

We accused him of minimizing a serious problem with a corny saying.

Frank cut us short, however, insisting that *something* had made the new Eagle Scout return to our camp. As long as little "Johnny" was with us (Frank was never good with names), it was our responsibility to provide him a quality program.

With a stern glance in my direction, Frank made it clear that, for the next two days, Eagle Scout Daniel Johnson was to be my challenge.

Adventures on land and lake

Deciding that the only way I could get through the next 36 hours was with creativity, I took Frank's suggestion at face value. Dan would have a great time, I resolved, even if it killed me.

With Dan as my canoe partner, we got off to an inauspicious start. He had earned his Canoeing merit badge, it seems, in an indoor pool; his bow stroke was effective mainly in drenching me.

So we worked on canoe strokes, and after considerable effort it began to look like Dan's feeble efforts were actually propelling our craft. His friends were impressed.

After crossing the lake, we prepared to set out on our hike. For backpacks in those days, campers used diamond hitches to lash their gear to pack frames. Dan's knot-tying left his pack looking as if it would hold together for less than five minutes.

Not wanting to call attention to yet another of his failings, I called the group together and announced that *all* the packs looked a bit loose. I had them disassemble their packs, and "randomly" picked Dan's to show them the proper way to lash one securely. Then we hit the trail.

After less than a mile, it became evident that, in order to keep up, Dan was going to need more breaks than the rest of the group.

So I announced that the hike would include some intense "nature study." Every hundred yards or so, I found an interesting plant or rock to use as an excuse to stop. No one seemed to suspect that these breaks allowed Dan to keep up with us.

'Klutz' no more

After a while, in spite of myself, I began to enjoy this game. I let Dan use my personal spice kit, and everyone declared his canned spaghetti tasted far better than the usual camp fare.

We just "happened" to pull cleanup together, and our pans came out cleaner than they had started. By the end of the trip, I was worn out, but everyone seemed to have forgotten that Dan was a klutz. Including Dan.

I thought Dan had enjoyed our trek, but he never really said as much. Soon, the week was over and the camp moved on to more pressing issues, the "Eagle Scout Daniel Johnson" jokes fading with the summer sun.

I worked on staff one more summer, but Dan was not with his troop when it arrived. Someone thought he had quit, but no one really seemed to know or care. I got on with the rest of my life.

A trail encounter

My camp staff days behind me, I continued to hike, camp, and climb. Late one cool, misty October afternoon, I was putting in a few last solo miles to an isolated, remote campsite in the Adirondacks.

The trail was one of those wide, muddy, erstwhile stream beds, common in the northeast. Through the mist, backlit by the setting sun, I saw another backpacker descending toward me. This, I remember thinking, was clearly someone who knew what he was doing.

Tall, strong, with perfectly balanced gear, he negotiated the rocky trail with an aplomb and confidence that marked a veteran outdoorsman.

When he was a few feet away, he stopped, gave me a look of suspected recognition, and asked if I had worked at a Scout camp nearly a decade earlier. "Dan Johnson," he introduced himself with an outstretched hand.

"Eagle Scout Daniel Johnson!" I blurted out, before realizing what I was saying.

Within minutes, we shucked our packs, and he skillfully fired up a backpacker stove to make some coffee. He quickly filled in the details of his life: college, graduate school, and a love for the outdoors that - he admitted - had started on our seemingly ill-fated canoe trip years ago. He hoped soon to become involved again in Scouting as a leader.

We both had some distance to go before nightfall, so we quickly cleaned up, said our goodbyes, and made promises (still unkept) to "keep in touch." As I watched him move off down the trail, so obviously at home in the woods, I thought back to my old program director.

"Never give up on a Scout."

You were right, Frank.

The mist was not only in the air.

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