

USING OUTDOOR SKILLS TO INCREASE MEMBERSHIP AND RETENTION

From an elevated vantage point, it can be ascertained that outdoor skills are one of Scouting's major attractions. It would then follow, by impressively demonstrating their outdoor skill prowess in a public setting, Scouts BSA units could experience a positive impact in their effort to attract and recruit new members.



Baking Cobbler on their Chippewa Kitchen to Share with the Public During a Scout Expo

However, a prevalent problem with most of today's troops is: their level of outdoor skills expertise is not developed enough to put these skills into action in a manner that would attract and favorably impress the public.

At the root of this dilemma is the widespread practice, by many Scouts BSA units, to treat outdoor skill-related, early rank requirements as merely something in the handbook to check off after a one-time demonstration. Hence, it is apparent that many of today's troops are not providing valuable opportunities to *put these skills into action* in ways that bring the skills to life, and in ways that reinforce their acquisition. It is also apparent, by failing to take advantage of a host of *rewarding, outdoor skill challenges*, these troops are losing out in sure fire ways to involve and

USING OUTDOOR SKILLS TO INCREASE MEMBERSHIP AND RETENTION

engage their Scouts, while also adding a great deal of fun to their meetings. In itself, this kind positive participation and fun serves to increase a unit's rate of retention, and in itself can serve to attract new members. Of course, when these early rank-required outdoor skills are not used, Scouts find it most difficult to present them in a public display that impressively shows off what they can do.

Apart from the inability of many troops to demonstrate these timeless skills to the public with the goal of recruiting new members, such superficial attention to outdoor skills limits the Scouts' experience of *a wide array of positive outcomes*. These outcomes will be presented later in this paper.

How can this problem be addressed? What follows are some steps which, when taken, will eventually result in contributing to improved recruiting, a higher rate of retention, and increased membership.

Step 1: *More effectively share with members of Scouting America the kinds of advantageous, outdoor skill activities that benefit Scouts and their units.* On a regular basis, a troop's Patrol Leaders' Council should include fun-filled and rewarding Scout skill challenges during the activities section of the troop meeting's agenda. Besides being a most desirable end in itself, these activities also serve to bolster the Scouts' ability to use the featured skills to share with the public something unique and attractive. A well-indexed library of these worthwhile activities is available via [scouting.org](https://scoutingactivities.com/scout-skill-challenges/) and already in use, but at this juncture, not at all on a large scale. <https://scoutingactivities.com/scout-skill-challenges/>

Referencing this catalogued collection, in conjunction with a colorful portrayal of a chosen, fun-filled activity, can readily be featured as an attractive weekly post in *Aaron on Scouting* and in a colorful monthly column in *Scout Life*. Such an ongoing approach will most certainly serve to inform, motivate, and even inspire Scout leaders and Scouts to join in on the fun, and cash in on the advantages. What follows is a sample, featuring the useful sheet bend and the activity referred to as the "Sheet Bend Tug of War":

HAVE FUN PUTTING YOUR SCOUT SKILLS INTO ACTION



The sheet bend is a quick and effective way to join together two lines. Whether the lines are of equal or different diameters, tied correctly, the sheet bend will not fail or collapse. Required for Second Class, the sheet bend should be in every Scout's outdoor skills toolbox. Whereas the square knot serves to

bind the lines down onto an object, the sheet bend serves to "bend" two lines together, and, unlike the square knot, even when pulled very tight, it's easy to undo. To learn how to tie a sheet bend, refer to the Scouts BSA Handbook.

After any Scout skill is learned, there should be an opportunity to put it into action in a fun way that illustrates how it's used. Here's a friendly competition your troop will really enjoy:

SHEET BEND TUG OF WAR



– *Materials:* for every two teams, one 4-foot and two 10-foot x 1/4-inch braided nylon cords, a 40-foot playing area with a marked center line.

– *Method:* The object of this game is to pull the 4-foot rope away from the other other team. The contest can be played between patrol teams or between chosen troop teams. In the center of the

playing area is the 4-foot cord. Two teams assemble facing each other on either side, twenty feet away from the center line. On signal, each team quickly sends up one Scout along with their 10-foot cord. They must join their cord to the 4-foot cord with sheet bend. Once they do, they can pull the cord away from the other Scout, or they both have the knot tied at the same time, can attempt to do so as in an ordinary



USING OUTDOOR SKILLS TO INCREASE MEMBERSHIP AND RETENTION

tug of war, the winner pulling the other four feet.

– *Scoring:* If a Scout completes the knot first and hence can easily pull the rope away,

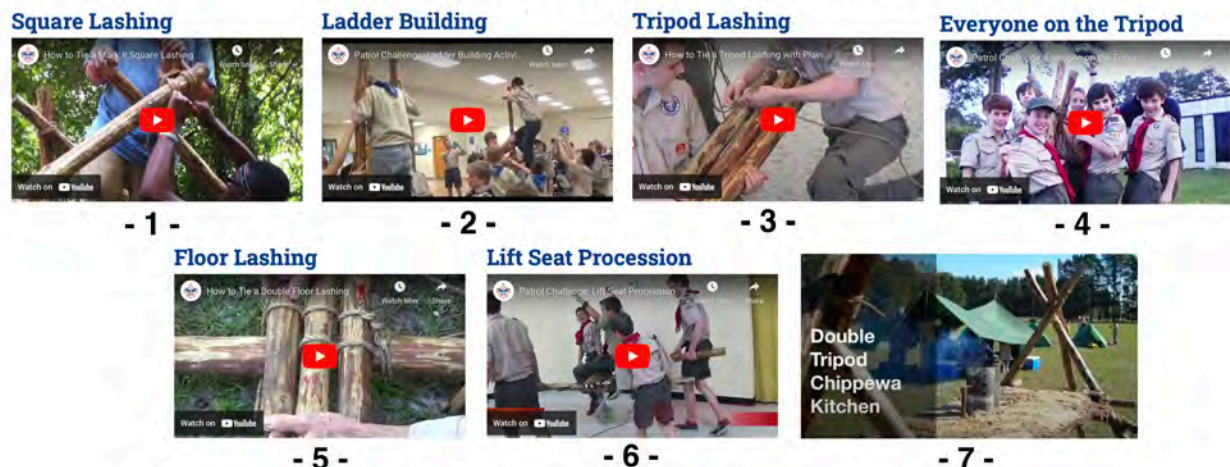


they score three points for their team. If the knot was tied incorrectly, the other team scores two points. If both Scouts complete the knot at the same time, and both are tied correctly, the Scout that can pull the 4-foot rope for four feet towards their patrol scores one point for their team. If one of the knots is incorrectly tied, the other patrol scores two points whether or not the rope is pulled to their side. Learn about a wide variety of fun, Scout skill challenges and troop meeting games in the Activities section of Troop Leader Resources: <https://troopleader.scouting.org/activities/>

View additional samples [HERE](#).

(Referred to in Step 4 below)

SEQUENTIAL, ACTIVITY-BASED APPROACH



USING OUTDOOR SKILLS TO INCREASE MEMBERSHIP AND RETENTION

Step 2: More effectively teach basic and advanced outdoor skills to both youth and adult members of our movement. In order to enable Scouts to fruitfully acquire useful outdoor skills, it is incumbent upon their leaders to know how to demonstrate and share these same skills. Undoubtedly, there will be occasions when a Scoutmaster or their assistants cannot rely upon an experienced youth leader to impart a particular skill to another troop member. Adult leaders should be equipped to easily example these basic skills during troop meetings and outings.

An updated IOLS training program, providing an activity-based approach to teaching and presenting early rank-required outdoor skills needs to be implemented. Putting these skills into action during training sessions, in ways that illustrate how they are used and providing an opportunity to rely upon them to complete a specific task, brings these skills to life and makes them relevant.



Putting Square and Tripod Lashings into Action during a Creatively-Presented IOLS Session

All of the existing BSA youth and adult training sessions containing segments carried out in the outdoors can use a good overhauling. Especially during team building opportunities, relevant outdoor skills should be more widely incorporated and put into action in ways that are engaging and fun.

Step 3: Ensure the BSA's presentation of outdoor skills is exemplary. Improve, and in some instances correct, poorly-stated or misleading information in various BSA publications. For example, in the *Scouts BSA Handbook*, the long-standing approach to tying the clove hitch, a fundamental and oft-used skill, is contrary to the universally-accepted approach, which is easier to apply. Another example pertains to the contents of First Class lashing requirements 3a and 3c. Sorely needed revisions have been agreed upon by the former camping committee and

USING OUTDOOR SKILLS TO INCREASE MEMBERSHIP AND RETENTION

directors of the national jamboree pioneering area, but though submitted for review through prescribed channels, to date they have not been implemented. **Note:** There are quite a few [additional examples](#).

The need for an authorized body to oversee outdoor skill-related information is clearly illustrated by the blatantly inaccurate description of fire by friction included in a relatively recent article published for all to see in *Scout Life*. Though created with the best of intentions, it is obviously written from an uninformed viewpoint bereft of actual experience.

Step 4: Institute a training opportunity for both youth and adult leaders featuring the preeminently-successful “sequential, activity-based approach” of presenting outdoor skills, referencing Scouting America’s [library of Scout skill challenges](#). Related sessions have been presented during conferences at the Philmont Training Center and are always very well received.

Note: The following two salient steps are outside the scope of this paper, but they would surely contribute to the realization of this paper’s intent.

Step 5: Adopt the NCAP Recommended Practice submitted for the Scoutcraft area of residential camps. This solicited proposal has been in the hands of the NCAP committee for several years. The setup, materials and instruction presented in a Scout camp’s Scoutcraft area should expose Scouts to all the best practices. It is disappointing to see what passes for an acceptable presentation of outdoor skills in many camps.

Step 6: Require Scoutcraft directors and First Year Camper directors to attend the Outdoor Skills section of National Camping School. The syllabus presents an activity-based approach to presenting outdoor skills, and the feedback has been positive regarding attendees favorably utilizing what is presented during the session.

How can the first four steps be carried out, and at what cost? In addition to putting forth the subject matter contained herein, the intended purpose of this paper is to propose the development of a committee, task force, or some other authorized group to:

- implement the sharing of Scout skill challenges for troop meetings and outings by creating illustrated, print promotions and disseminating them through existing BSA channels.
- contribute relevant input during the updating of existing outdoor skill-related training programs
- oversee outdoor skill-related content in BSA publications as well as outdoor skill-related content online
- create and help promote a training program introducing Scout leaders to the “sequential, activity-based approach” of presenting outdoor skills

The "authorized group" would consist of several subject matter experts possessing years of experience related to outdoor skills training, and many years in the field directly associated with Scouts BSA units. The "authorized group" would have decades of video production experience, and be skilled in creating and producing well-written and well-illustrated, brand compliant articles for submission through appropriate publication channels.

Naturally, this entire undertaking would be an effort by volunteers, many of whom have ample time to devote to the improvement of the movement they love. Hence, there is absolutely no cost to Scouting America for anything the "authorized group" would do.

USING OUTDOOR SKILLS TO INCREASE MEMBERSHIP AND RETENTION

The following compilation of positive outcomes was taken from a presentation entitled “Putting Outdoor Skills into Action to Enhance the Scouting Program,” included in the most recent National Outdoor Conference. Though, from a Scout’s perspective, most of these desirable byproducts have no direct bearing on increasing membership or a unit’s rate of retention, it is undeniable, from a broader perspective, that the roles played, the experiences given, and the intangibles provided shed a bright light on the merits of one of Scouting’s major attractions.

—> What are some of the worthwhile experiences related to putting outdoor skills into action?

Scouts experience:

- **Planning their Course of Action** – In order to experience success, before they put their skills into action, Scouts need to put their heads together and prepare. Planning is an essential step, so they can accomplish whatever they are setting out to do.
- **Cooperating with One Another and Practicing Teamwork** – This is how things most effectively get done, and this is how a group succeeds. When small groups of Scouts are faced with challenges to use their acquired outdoor skills, everyone has an opportunity to get into the act and contribute to the group’s success.



Planning



Cooperation



Engagement and Focus

USING OUTDOOR SKILLS TO INCREASE MEMBERSHIP AND RETENTION

- **Becoming Engaged, Focused and Involved** – The attention of the Scouts is maintained as they get to use the skills they've learned to complete a task that is challenging and fun.
- **Pride in Satisfying an Objective and Meeting a Challenge** – Because they can use their resources, and rely upon their skills to satisfy the challenges they face, Scouts get to feel good about themselves and their abilities.
- **Being Successful** – Nothing succeeds like success. Of course, failures are acceptable and Scouts can learn from their oversights and mistakes. But, when they are enabled to put the skills they've learned into action and apply the principles of sharing leadership, sharing responsibilities, and working together, success is within their reach.



Pride



Success

—> What important roles do traditional outdoor skills play in today's Scouting?

- **To Attract Youth to Our Program** – The lure of learning and using these kinds of outdoor skills appeals to many young people. View: [Increasing Troop Membership by Promoting Outdoor Skills to the Public](#).

USING OUTDOOR SKILLS TO INCREASE MEMBERSHIP AND RETENTION

- **To Enhance the Enjoyment of Camping** – As they continually come into play in conjunction with our wide range of available outdoor adventures, it is enjoyable to be able to apply these kinds of outdoor skills on outings.
- **To Contribute a Unique Brand of Fun to Our Program** – The *novel* activities that feature these kinds of outdoor skills are eminently satisfying.
- **To Provide Our Members with a Useful Set of Tools that can be Utilized Over Their Lifetime** – There often can be opportunities to use these skills repeatedly, during work and recreation.



Enhanced Enjoyment



Unique Brand of Fun



Useful Set of Tools

- **To Open the Door to the Development of Character and Leadership** – Putting outdoor skills into action with their patrol and troop contributes to a Scout's development of good character and leadership—two central aims of the Boy Scouts of America. View: [Outdoor Skills: Character and Leadership Development](#)

—> What are some other valuable intangibles inherent in putting outdoor skills into action?

- **Responsibility** – By using their outdoor skills to contribute to the welfare of the group, Scouts learn the essential meaning of good citizenship. Sharing responsibilities is the hallmark of the patrol method.

USING OUTDOOR SKILLS TO INCREASE MEMBERSHIP AND RETENTION

- **Resourcefulness** – Faced with the necessity of using whatever resources are on hand, by relying on their outdoor skills Scouts learn what it means to become resourceful.
- **Organization** – Organizational skills are honed as Scouts are confronted with the need to keep things accessible and neat as they use their skills to most successfully meet challenges.



Sharing Responsibilities



Using One's Resources



Organization

- **Self Reliance** – Using their skills, Scouts learn they can rely upon themselves to overcome obstacles.
- **Self Assurance** – By putting their skills into action, Scouts experience a growing confidence in their abilities to get things done.



Self Reliance



Confidence

Larry Green

Author: 2024 Edition Pioneering Merit Badge Pamphlet

Author: Outdoor Skills Section, National Camping School

Author: Camping and Pioneering Program Features for Troops and Crews