

Boot Camp Area Camp

Area camps are the icing on the cake for a successful Scouting program. While the bread and butter of Scouting is the weekly meetings and local events, area camps offer experiences unobtainable elsewhere, and have the ability to leave kids with incredible memories. You want the kids to go home saying 'Wow!'. Activities and games that are not economical or fun with a small number of kids, are where the area camp really shines. With area camps targeted at 100-150 kids, there are not the scale problems of 600 person council camps. Kids, of all ages, love meeting, interacting, playing, and battling (!) their counterparts from other packs. One of my first Cub camp experiences was watching a hundred Cubs whack each other with pool noodles, and loving every minute of it! Here we will describe a specific area camp as well as identifying the key points in organising and running a large scale event.

Once it has been decided to run a large event, regular planning meetings are crucial. They not only allow a close eye to be kept on the progress, but provide a mechanism for ideas to be bounced around. Face to face meetings are usually a lot more beneficial than email. It is one person's comment that triggers someone else's thought, and so on. For this camp, we held one hour meetings twice a week for approximately three months. This sounds like a lot, but in reality a number of the leaders were walking around the village for exercise at that time, so we just did the planning as we walked.

Preparation and attention to detail are the key to any activity, and even more so with large events. It is not a single large thing that makes for a successful event, but the hundreds of minuscule items. Any one of these by themselves wouldn't be missed, but the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

The biggest mistake made in planning area camps is not having enough activities to keep the kids occupied. Nothing ruins a kid's perspective of a camp more than standing around waiting for something to happen, or worse, standing in a line for 30-45 minutes. So for a planned 100-150 Cubs, we wanted eight separate activities. Thus we would have no more than 18 Cubs at any given activity. This ensured minimal waiting. Each activity ran for 45 minutes, with an additional 10 minutes travel time between activities.

With any theme, a lot of the success is tied to how well the theme is carried throughout the camp. Ideally, the kids, leaders, and organisers live and breathe the theme from the moment kids arrive until they walk out the door. We chose an army theme of Boot Camp for this camp. It fits in well with the outdoors and leadership training, and it can relate to many activities. The Cubs were encouraged to dress in camouflage as part of the theme, and to decorate their campsites. All the organising leaders and helpers were given ranks, ranging from General to Sargent. We created a maze of camouflage netting on the path to our campsite through which we had to negotiate. This event was held at the Whispering Pines Scout Reserve in eastern Ontario.

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Marketing events is extremely important in this day and age of competing activities. Packs not only need to be convinced their Cubs will enjoy themselves, but they need to have detailed information with which to make their own plans. Very early on in the planning process, a thorough information package must be developed for distribution to potential participants. This package should include a schedule, activity information (with real descriptions), specific items that must be brought, and a map of the camp with all the important locations marked. Remember, even though you may have been to a dozen area camps, there are always leaders and packs out there who have never been to either any camp, an area camp, or to your specific location.

The marketing package should include specific information that leaders can use to sell the camp to their Cubs. Adding photographs where possible is extremely valuable. In our own case, we were competing against a school festival that weekend, and thus we were doing show and tell with our Cubs every week for a couple of months prior to the camp - and every one of our Cubs skipped the school activity for our camp!

Even though email promises instant connectivity, it remains dependant on people to actually read those same email. I recommend not only emailing information packages to all groups, but sending them by post as well. Don't send to just the head leader, but send to them all, as it maybe one of the other leaders who really drives the program. Show and tell sessions at area meetings, and even section meetings, can also be very beneficial.

The opening started with phrases like, "Battalion Attention". All intended to get the Cubs involved in the camp theme. The Cubs were separated by platoon, and were off to their first activities! A leader was assigned to each platoon to ensure the Cubs got from one activity to the next.

The Cubs from each pack were mixed into platoons with Cubs from other packs. In general, we tried to have two Cubs from each pack in a platoon, so any shy ones would not be afraid. This arrangement is quite often used at area camps, and encourages the Cubs to make new friends. When packs registered on Friday evening, they were given one dog tag (on a bead chain) for each Cub. The dog tags were each engraved with a platoon number. The leaders of each pack, then gave each one of their Cubs a dog tag, and could pair up buddies as they saw fit.

One very unique aspect to the camp was the method in which lunch was handled. We wanted to imitate army rations, but without the expense. Each pack provided one packed lunch for each of their kids. These were all placed in a large pile, and when the platoons went off to their first activity, they stopped by the pile and each Cub picked a lunch (the restriction naturally being that they couldn't pick one from their own pack). At lunch time, the platoon stopped on the trail and then each Cub discovered what they had. Just like real soldiers, they were encouraged to trade items within their ration pack.

Rather than using the road in the camp, all the movement between activities was cross-country on trails. Some were established trails, others were just flagged and the Cubs had to bushwhack their way through. Just like the army!

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Cubs are at their best when they are active, and toy guns always go down well. We built simple rubber band guns for each Cub. These were distributed at the beginning of the camp, along with five bright yellow rubber bands for each Cub. We figured that the bright colours would not get lost when shot in the woods. A salutation goes to the Cubs, as not a single rubber band has ever been found at the camp since the event.

This area camp traditionally has a trophy awarded to the winning pack. The Cubs were rewarded for participation, team work, and/or skill. In keeping with the military theme, empty 7.62mm shell casings were used as the points mechanism. These were handed out at each activity. The empty casings were brand new (to avoid any possible health effects of used casings), and were graciously donated by the Eastern Ontario Handgun Club. Some roaming leaders had a few shells to handout when they saw examples of good Cub behaviour. On Sunday morning, each pack provided a count of their shell casings, with the winning pack being the one with the highest number. The Cubs each took home the shell casings they collected.

We tried very hard to have most of the activities being either brand new to the Cubs, or at least to have an unforeseen spin.

Stretcher Carry

This activity was designed to integrate first aid skills and team work, with a military twist. The objective was to build a stretcher (two spars and jackets), race into enemy held territory, retrieve a wounded Cub, and retreat to safety. The platoon was split into two, with half acting as the enemy, and the other half performing the rescue. The enemy Cubs were hidden along the route and armed with porcupine balls to throw at the rescuers,. The idea being that if you were hit, you had to lie down dead. Naturally, this didn't quite go according to plan, but the Cubs had a riot. As an added surprise, we had a couple of hidden activity leaders armed with Super Soakers. There were quite a few wet Cubs by the end. Rumour has it that a few "executions" were even held!

Weaponry

Here we had the standard slingshot activity. Clay pigeons, against a tarp back drop, make for good targets as they are inexpensive and it can easily be seen when they are hit. The Cubs get a kick out of seeing them break too. Marbles are the best ammunition, though pea gravel can also be used. The tarp back drop allows for most of the marbles to be recovered after each session.

Infiltration

A Kim's game board was hung in the centre of a small clearing. The objective of the platoon was to sneak close enough to memorise all the items. Guarding the game board were a couple of activity leaders. If a Cub was seen, and tagged by a guard, they had to play dead for a minute, then retreat and try again. At the end of the session the Cubs were awarded points based on how many items they could remember.

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Field Gun Race

This activity was imported from the UK Royal Tournament. Though instead of using real 1,000 pound field guns, we manufactured light weight wooden replicas. We had two field guns and two platoons racing against each other. They had to pull the field gun down the field, dismantle it, carry the pieces through and over some obstacles, pull the pieces across a bottomless chasm using a miniature aerial runway, put the field gun back together, and race it to the finish. This was certainly something the Cubs had never experienced before.

Semaphore

To ensure at least a bit of knowledge was absorbed during the camp, half the platoon had to send a coded message using two semaphore flags to the other half of the platoon. Once the complete message had been received, it could be decoded, giving directions to a hidden supply of Smarties. The two halves switched, with the second message naturally giving a different location!

Aerial Runway

Our camp is lucky enough to have a nice sized cliff, on which we can build an aerial runway. This is a good activity, as not only is it fun and exciting (think Wow!), but it offers the opportunity for the less adventurous Cubs to be pushed outside their comfort zone. Cubs can either be lowered down gently if they so request, or let go in free fall!

Dog Tag Engraving

At this station, we gave each Cub an additional brass dog tag. Two security engravers were setup for the Cubs to use. These ran off separate inverters and 12V car batteries. Note the duplication; always have backups for any key pieces of equipment, you can't afford for an activity not to be functional. As not all members of the platoon could engrave at once, a target range was setup for the rubber band guns. Remember - you never want idle Cubs!

Assault Course

Normally called an obstacle course, but remember we have a military theme. Here we had suspended barrels and tires through which to crawl, simulated barbed wire under which to squirm, a couple of rope bridges, a scramble net to climb, and a 6' wall to scale. The Cubs were timed to determine the winner from each platoon.

Wide Game

No camp is complete without a wide game. The old standby of capture the flag is repeated a little too often. After some research, we settled on *Smugglers & Spies*. The Cubs are split into two teams. The smugglers have to get small pieces of paper, with different point values, from their starting base to the finish base. The bases are separated by a forest. The objective of the spies is to stop the smugglers (by tagging them) and finding the pieces of paper. The spies had two minutes to search the smugglers once tagged, the only rule being that the paper must only be hidden in an outer layer of clothing. The hiding places the Cubs found were amazing: inside the Velcro of a baseball cap, between their toes, and even inside their lip! If the smuggler got the paper to the finish, they got the points, otherwise the spies got the points. This was the best wide game we have ever seen, especially as it was new to all the Cubs.

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Mug-Up

Traditional, this area camp has always had a communal mug-up on the Saturday night. In keeping with the Wow! factor, we avoided the standard chocolate chip cookies and hot chocolate. Instead we did hot apple cider and Ziploc Spoon Fudge. Each Cub was given a Ziploc bag containing the ingredients for fudge (see sidebar). They then squished the bag until well mixed, and ate (without a spoon!). This tastes really good, and again is a special treat.

The Saturday ended with a formal campfire. Packs were picked ahead of time to provide a song, skit, or cheer. This is a good time to practice magic campfire starts. Ours was done with match heads, a model rocket motor igniter, and a battery.

Sunday was our closing ceremony and the presentation of the camp trophy.

At any event, large or small, an official photographer should always be designated. They should have no other duties, so they can concentrate on their task. The resulting photographs make great marketing material. Make a CD and send it home with your Cubs who participated so their parents can see what fun they had, use them in a slideshow at a banquet, and show them during school talks for recruiting.

At the end of any major event, it is always beneficial to distribute a survey so as to get people's thoughts on the activities and overall organisation. Multiple choice is best, with an area for written comments. Be as granular as possible, but limit the survey to 1-2 pages. The trouble with many leaders, and organisations, is not having the interest in critiquing their own events. There is often too much back patting and ignoring of constructive criticism. No matter how well run an event, we should always be looking for ways to improve for the next time. Then most importantly, write a detailed report while all the details are fresh in your mind. This will be an invaluable document when planning your next event.

In summary, the key points for organising a successful area event:

- Thorough planning
- Details make the difference
- Find new ideas, don't keep re-using the old ones
- Ensure no line-ups for activities
- Try and make everything special
- Think Wow!

Yes it will be a lot of work, but it will be well worth it when you see the smiles on all the kids' faces. Both you and the kids will have great memories for years to come.

Michael Jackman, Robert Sargent, and Peter Cornelisse were all instrumental in the organising and operation of this event. Complete details and photographs from the camp can be found at <http://www.1stmerrickville.ca/bootcamp>.

Allan Yates, now a Venturer leader, often looks back with fondness on his days as a Cub leader.

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Aerial Runway Sidebar

Our aerial runways are always built to exceed the standards set by the UK Scout Association's Fact Sheet on aerial runway design. The Cubs wear a climbing harness and sit on a non-slip bosun's chair. The harness is secured separately to the main pulley. All equipment is rock climbing grade. Two separate brake mechanisms are used: A primary bungee cord which slows the person gently, and a separate rope at the bottom to catch the person if the bungee cord were to break.

Ziploc Spoon Fudge Sidebar

In a Ziploc bag, place the following ingredients:

1/2 cup icing sugar

2 teaspoon cream cheese

1 tablespoon cocoa powder

1 tablespoon butter (1/8 stick)

3 drops of vanilla

Squish until well mixed, then eat!