

First Among Equals

Scouters from across the country put leadership skills into action at the Philmont Leadership Challenge. BY MARK RAY | PHOTOGRAPHS BY VINCE HEPTIG

Morning assemblies at last fall's first-ever Philmont Leadership Challenge (PLC) course included the sort of groan-inducing humor that's familiar to Scouts around the world.

There was a "spot" announcement ("Arf! Arf!"), a less-than-helpful weather forecast ("progressive lightness through the day, followed by darkening around dusk"), and the latest scores from the world of sports (team names omitted, of course). There was even a water bottle toast to Philmont's iconic Tooth of Time peak.

But then came the installation of the day's patrol leaders and something you don't usually hear at Scout camp: a snippet of Latin. The new patrol leaders promised to become *primus inter pares*—first among equals—and committed themselves to helping others grow and succeed for the good of all. Perhaps more than anything, this emphasis on servant leadership demonstrated that PLC is not your typical



Black Horse Patrol's David Graves (left) of Simi Valley, Calif., and PLC staffer Mike Hardebeck pause for the "overlook look" at Lover's Leap.



Aiding and abetting: David Lambeth (above left) and Mel Tolentino practice first aid on “injured” PLC staffer David Shoulders. And JoAnn Hohl (below right) maneuvers past a pole with the help of her Rayado Patrol colleague Douglas Spencer.



adult leader training course.

“The servant leadership theme is absolutely the bedrock of this course,” said Dr. Mary Stevens of San Rafael, Calif., project leader for the PLC design team and course director for the pilot.

Stevens explained that servant leadership means, “We are here to serve others, that our goal as a leader is for our teams to succeed. That transfers back to our church, work, family, school—all aspects of our lives.”

Though servant leadership was central to the course, the 56 participants didn’t sit around for a week discussing it. In fact, they didn’t sit around much at all. Because it’s based on the National Advanced Youth Leadership Experience (NAYLE), PLC is built around a series of modules that take participants beyond the classroom and into the Philmont backcountry.

According to Stevens, those modules let participants practice the leadership skills they learned at Wood Badge. “Each of them has been designed around two or three of the Wood Badge skills—be it conflict resolution, problem solving, or communicating,” she said.

On Tuesday morning, for example, the course's eight patrols tried their hands at geocaching, using GPS units to search for treasures hidden in caches around Philmont's Rocky Mountain Scout Camp, where the course was based.

On the surface, the geocaching module focused on land navigation. But participant William Wallace soon realized it had more to do with problem solving and teamwork.

"I'm learning that you can't always jump in. Sometimes you have to back off and let someone else figure out how to do it," said Wallace, an assistant Scoutmaster with Troop 266 in Houston. "It's difficult for a leader—at least for me it is—to back off and let somebody else take charge, especially if there's a possibility that they're not doing it quite right."

And they weren't doing it quite right in Wallace's Urraca Patrol. At one point, a patrol member entered the wrong coordinates into the GPS unit, sending the patrol toward a location three miles from camp.

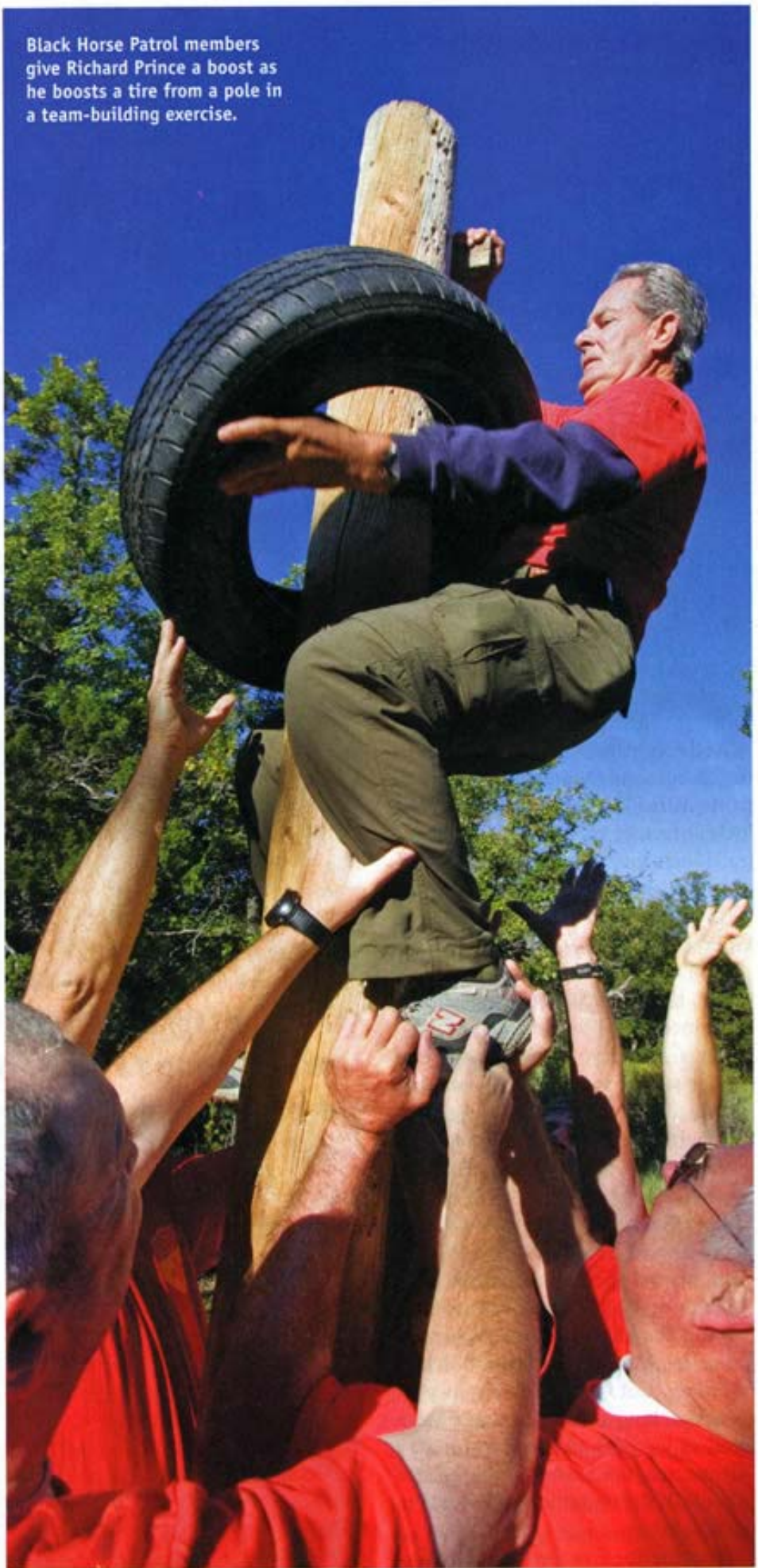
"We should have known we'd done something wrong," Wallace said. "All the rest of the points were less than a mile away."

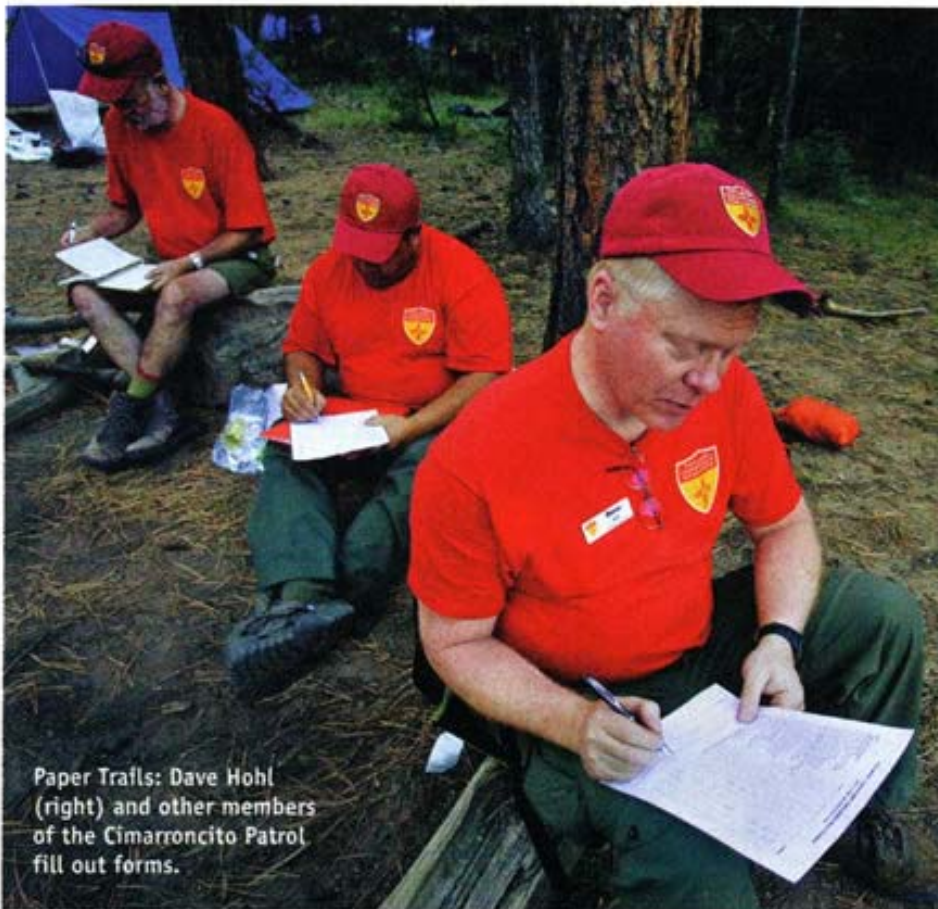
The Urracas realized their error before hiking too far, but they still hadn't found their last cache before time ran out. Neither had a few other patrols, which led to a troopwide discussion of what to do next. Some people viewed the exercise as a patrol competition and said each patrol should go back out and find its remaining caches. Others said the patrols needed to work together so that the troop as a whole would be successful.

As the discussion continued, participant Armando Aguirre of Sugarland, Tex., sat back and watched. A former Wood Badge course director, Aguirre knew what was happening and which leadership skills were being tested.

"You're an observer as well as a participant because you've got familiarity with those concepts," he said. "It's interesting that more people didn't catch on to the dynamics of what was going on."

Black Horse Patrol members give Richard Prince a boost as he boosts a tire from a pole in a team-building exercise.





Paper Trails: Dave Hohl (right) and other members of the Cimarroncito Patrol fill out forms.

At the conclusion of the exercise, all the caches were found, and the participants shared the rewards from inside a locked treasure chest. Over a Philmont trail lunch, they reflected on the experience and the implications of the “big team” concept they’d first learned at Wood Badge.

By Thursday, when trail food gave way to the “Iron Skillet” competition, the concept had begun to sink in. At 4:30 P.M. that day, the patrols received similar sets of ingredients—ham, bananas, tortillas, corn chips, egg noodles, butter, salsa, a zucchini—and were given an hour to prepare three-course meals.

The Black Horse Patrol went to work. David Graves of Simi Valley, Calif., started opening cans, while Dino Radosta of Wake Forest, N.C., began carving the zucchini into decorative garnishes. Meanwhile, Richard Prince of Parker, Colo., sautéed onions over a backpacking stove, offering a stern word of warning to his patrol mates: “Gentlemen, not a word of this goes to my wife. If she finds out I can cook, I’m in trouble.”

Working for five days together, the

patrols became well-oiled machines. And the teamwork quickly spilled over as participants scurried between tables, borrowing ingredients and peeking at other patrols’ creations. By the time the competition ended an hour later, nobody was surprised that everyone had won.

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Although the participants received beads for their hard work, the real prize was sharing in one another’s impromptu culinary masterpieces, including Stamp Mill chicken and noodles, bananas Foster with granola-bar crumbles, and a to-die-for tortilla soup created by Luis Montalvo of Arecibo, P.R.

Speaking later, Montalvo, a vice president of the Puerto Rico Council, said he planned to return home and promote both PLC and NAYLE, a course that hadn’t seen any participants from his council.

“If this course can push our leaders to step up, imagine what NAYLE can do for a kid who’s starting to grow,” he said. “We’ll improve our youth leadership, and our country needs it.”

Fellow Puerto Rican Scouter Santos Ortiz Perez also planned to promote PLC back home, and he already knew what he would say: “Don’t hesitate to do it. Don’t think that it will be a negative experience. No, it’s a growing experience. It’s a learning experience. There is no money in the world to buy this kind of experience.”

For Larry Crawley, Scoutmaster of Troop 2 in Helena, Ala., PLC was the realization of a lifelong dream. “I had wanted to come to Philmont since I was 14 but just didn’t have the financial resources at the time,” he said. “I spent 34 years getting here.”

Crawley appreciated the opportunity to network with Scouters from across the country and to learn more about servant leadership, something his church talks about a lot.

But, for him, the highlight of the week was an overnight experience in the Philmont backcountry. On Wednesday, participants hiked to Lover’s Leap Camp, where they spent the night, getting a taste of life on a Philmont trek.

“Lover’s Leap was just an incred-

ible view. It really was awe-inspiring,” Crawley said. “Lying in the meadow last night stargazing, [I realized] I’d never been anywhere that had no light pollution. I’d never seen the Milky Way until last night. That became the pinnacle for me.”

Crawley said he planned to take home more than just memories, though. “I feel as if I can go back and do a far better job of working with the Scouts and the other leaders,” he said. “I’ve got a lot better grasp of how much more I need to let go.”

While Crawley was focused on im-

Attending the Philmont Leadership Challenge

The Philmont Leadership Challenge will be offered twice in 2009: Aug. 16-22 and Sept. 20-26. Participants must have attended or staffed Wood Badge for the 21st Century or have completed the "old" Wood Badge and staffed Wood Badge for the 21st Century, National Youth Leader Training, or NAYLE. Participants must meet Philmont's Level A (back-country) health standards.

For more information, visit www.philmontleadershipchallenge.org or www.scouting.org/HighAdventure/Philmont/PTC.aspx. The course fee is \$450.



During an exercise in the GPS geocaching course, the Urraca Patrol (above) locates a cache containing a tiny Phillips 66 gas pump. Two days later (below), patrol members show off their "Iron Skillet" competition concoctions made from corn chips, tortillas, bananas, egg noodles, ham, butter, salsa—and zucchini.



proving his troop, Ben Feril, a district volunteer from North East, Md., was thinking of ways to use the lessons of PLC on the job. A Navy captain, Feril serves on the staff of the chief of naval operations at the Pentagon, where he's responsible for the deployment of medical personnel to places such as Iraq and Afghanistan.

"I have junior Navy officers who are going into the seventh year of this war, and they need to be able to understand that good values and making good decisions are important," Feril said.

"Some aspects of servant leadership are being taught in the military, but I think we could do a better job. I hope I can share what I've learned from this experience with my colleagues and superiors."

He may also share it with future generations. As the week concluded, participants were challenged to leave a legacy, much the same way Waite Phillips did when he gave his ranch to the Boy Scouts of America.

"Those are the kinds of decisions I'd like to make," Feril said.

And decisions such as that represent the ultimate leadership challenge. **S**

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