

# Choosing A Backpack

## Troop 518 Training

The basic packing container for all Troop 518 outings is the backpack. The backpack is one of the most important pieces of camping equipment the Scout uses. It represents a major expenditure and great care should be used in its purchase. Like shoes, the backpack needs to correctly fit the user for comfort and utility. A poor fitting backpack will turn the average outing into an ordeal that may end your son's Scouting career.

The following guidelines should help in your selection of a pack. Keep in mind that selecting a pack will involve some compromise. No backpack will meet all the needs of an active Scout. Cost will always be a major factor but a carefully selected pack is an investment in future adventure and enjoyment. A good pack will last for years with just a little care. In our opinion the following features are generally accepted as mandatory:

- Pack with internal or external frame. Absolutely NO book bags or army rucksacks.
- Padded hip belt that can be adjusted to fully tighten over the pelvis.
- Hip belt buckles and adjusters that do not slip or loosen during hiking.
- Padded shoulder straps that can be adjusted tighter or looser while walking.
- Volume of approximately 2500 cubic inches or greater. (4000 cu in or greater for an adult.)
- Exposed frame or loops to use to strap on external loads such as sleeping bags.

### External Frames

External frame packs have been around for years and offer significant cost savings. The rigid frame is usually aluminum tubing that has been welded, bolted or bonded together. External frame packs have a greater distance between the user and the pack and are therefore cooler to wear in summer. The exposed frame makes it easy to attach almost any type sleeping bag or accessory. External frames may not offer as many adjustments due to fewer mounting points for the belts and straps. The aluminum tubing can also be easily damaged by rough use.

### Internal Frames

The latest pack technology uses internal frames. These are usually two flat metal bars sewn into the wall of the pack itself. The pack lies directly against the back and is allowed to flex with the user's torso. Internal frames therefore achieve the greatest load capability for energy expended (they are more efficient load carriers). The larger carrying capacity is definitely an asset for Scouts weighing less than 90 pounds.

### The Pack

The pack itself should have a volume of around 2500 cu in. A pack that mounts the sleeping bag, mattress and tent externally could be smaller. More equipment can be crammed into a "top loading" pack, but it can be very difficult to locate an item placed on the bottom. It is advantageous to have a pack with several small pockets on the rear and sides to store items such as first aid kits, water and snacks. All packs should be made of waterproof fabric and have heavy duty seams and zippers. All attach points should be reinforced with sewn-on nylon strapping. The best quality packs have a detachable section to hold food and cooking items.

### Hip Belts

The addition of hip belts allows approximately 2/3 of the pack's weight to be directly transmitted away from the back and onto the legs. The belt should feature a stiff pad that can be placed over the pelvis for effective load transfer. The buckle will need to be a quick release variety that absolutely will not slip from its position. The belt should have long enough ends so that two hands can be used to chinch it down. The best quality packs have cups or are contoured to capture the pelvis.

### Shoulder Straps

The shoulder straps must be padded and wide enough to be comfortable. There should be a degree of firmness to the padding so that it doesn't "roll" when the pack is loaded and you've been on the trail for a period of time. The two points at which the straps attach to the top of the frame should not be more than 4 inches apart. The straps should be long enough to allow for adjustment and should have a buckle that allows them to be adjusted. Better packs have contoured straps. The best packs have a small latch connecting the straps at the breast level.

### Accessory Attachment

Whichever type or brand of backpack you buy, some items will need to be attached to the exterior of the pack. This should be done with straps, not rope. The exposed frame of the external frame backpack offers many places to attach items. However, with internal frame packs attach points need to be sewn onto the body of the pack. Be sure the pack has plenty of strong attach points that allow a load to be secured in such a way that it will not shift during the motion of walking. Swaying loads are very uncomfortable and can be hazardous.

### Recommendations

The **Peak1** line of backpacks (by Coleman) offer the best design-price compromise we have seen. They offer the *Shoshone* internal frame with 4620 cu in at \$65. They offer a novel flexible plastic external frame called the *Explorer* with 2575 cu in at \$50. The frame is designed to be virtually indestructible while having many more adjustments than a standard external frame. This is a tremendous advantage if your Scout is in his growth years. In our opinion you should not buy a backpack before looking at a Peak1 series.

### Sources

**Sports Authority** and **REI** are two good local sources for new backpacks. Occasionally, good backpacks can be found at **Play It Again Sports**, garage sales or from friends. However, always buy a backpack for fit, never for price. Older backpacks with poor quality hip belts or shoulder straps can be updated. Broken belt latches can be replaced. **REI** carries a full line of backpacking replacement parts and accessories. **REI** is one of the few stores that actually fit people for backpacks. There is a **Coleman** store at the Commerce Outlet Mall (I-85 @ exit 52). You can mail order backpacks online from **Campmor** ([www.campmor.com](http://www.campmor.com)).

### Packing Hints

We propose buying the backpack first in order to make certain the other equipment (mattress, sleeping bag) can be accommodated easily. The remaining camping equipment should be purchased with low weight in mind. Pack the heavier items close to the hiker's back and the lighter items further out. Each day's clothes should be packed in 1-gallon zip lock bags. Any item can be made 100% waterproofed by placing it in a full-sized garbage bag. The weight of the fully loaded backpack should not exceed 25% of the Scout's body weight.

### Tips

Until you know more about backpacks we highly recommend that you try several styles and brands before purchasing. **REI** will rent you a fitted backpack for a weekend. Never buy a backpack your son has not worn. Load 30 pounds of weight into the pack and wear it inside the store for 15-20 minutes as a test. **REI** sells used rental and returned equipment at greatly reduced prices, but you have to ask to see them. The **Coleman** store offers Scouts a 10% discount.

More than anything else, remember this: the Troop staff is always happy to talk to you about equipment purchases. Please do not hesitate to call any or all of us if you have any questions.