

The Telegraph

Robots all the rage: Nashua hosts annual FIRST competition

NASHUA – The gymnasium at Nashua High School South was filled Saturday with roaring crowds of energetic, unswerving teams of tech-savvy teens and their mechanically inclined mentors as part of the FIRST Robotics Competition.

After more than a month of designing their robots, building each one to meet specific engineering challenges and taking the machines through multiple test runs, 40 New England-based teams and their prized machines were pitted against each other in the Granite State District for the 2015 game called Recycle Rush.

High school-aged team leaders maneuvered their robots on a small battlefield, looking to collect points by stacking a series of plastic totes on scoring platforms while their opponents had additional scoring opportunities by tossing litter disguised as pool noodles onto the playing surface.

Each of the 40 teams had a different design or tactic in their lead up to the competition. And those in attendance at the jam-packed gymnasium were fired up for the showdown.

Fans supporting their teams wore bright neon-colored T-shirts and grooved along with the rock 'n' roll and surf music that played between matches. Some dressed in steampunk clothing or decked themselves out as

their team's mascot and danced in a circle with others wearing mad scientist lab coats or fluorescent capes.

Supporters of Boston College High School's FIRST Robotics Team No. 3958: Schrödinger's Cat sang Neil Diamond's "Sweet Caroline" from the bleachers. Most cheering sections whooped louder and harder than fans at professional sporting events.

"Spirit is very big. There's actually an award given out for spirit, so it's very important for teams," said Samantha Beauchemin, a junior at Bishop Guertin High School and one of 57 members of Team No. 811 known as the Cardinals.

She was adorned with FIRST-themed buttons and a pair of safety goggles. At times, she used her iPhone to show photographs of the team's robot to scouts from other FRC clubs who are slated to ally with them in a later competition.

"It's really good to see teams working together while they are competing, lending parts or lending a hand in safety, seeing all the different aspects coming together. It's just so much fun," she said.

Organizers of FIRST Robotics say the competition combines the thrill of sport with science and technology to create new activities to promote innovation and engineering to high school students.

Brian Belley, an event committee co-chairman who served on a FIRST robotics team when he was in high school, now works at BAE Systems, a sponsor of the event. The company has been involved for years with the competition by providing mentors to local teams and bringing in volunteers for the two-day tournament.

According to Belley, Nashua is an ideal location to host a district tournament given the high concentration of legacy teams in southern New Hampshire. FIRST founder Dean Kamen lives in nearby Bedford and hosted the global kickoff from Manchester in early January.

Alec Muller, technical mentor to the Nashua-based Team No. 2342 known as the Phoenix Robotics, enjoys passing along his technical wisdom to an up-and-coming generation of students interested in robotics and engineering.

“This is one of the few things where they get to do something and then see whether or not their ideas work firsthand. It’s not judged by some other person that says ‘I like that or no, I don’t like that’ – In this competition, it either works or it doesn’t,” Muller said.

Fellow team mentor Jean-Marc Mourant, a senior director at Integrated Device Technology who has children involved in FIRST robotics, agreed.

“Getting the kids involved and interested and excited, that’s the best part,” he said. “It’s been a great experience.”

One club made up of students from Nashua’s North and South high schools, FRC Team No. 151 known as the Tough Techs, is slated to compete in the Pioneer Valley District Event in Springfield, Mass, next weekend. Members of the Tough Techs were on-hand Saturday to sell raffle tickets and help operate the concession stand.

FIRST, which stands for For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology, has more than 100 regional and district events leading to the worldwide championship in St. Louis, Mo. In total, roughly 75,000 high school students on nearly 3,000 teams will participate in the 2015 robotics challenge.

The New England championship is scheduled for mid-April at Worcester Polytechnic Institute’s Harrington Auditorium in Worcester, Mass.

New England’s six states are organized within the district model that can handle all the region’s teams. The Nashua high school first hosted the new district model in 2014.

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