
They've got competition down to a science

Contributed by Hurst Laviana, The Wichita Eagle

Mark Marshall appeared a bit nervous Saturday as his son Joey's Wichita Home School Warriors prepared to take the floor during the first round of their robot-building competition at Wichita State University.

"We've got at least two or three teams looking real good," Marshall said as the Warriors made last-minute preparations. "We'll be right up there -- unless something goes wrong."

The seventh annual BEST competition -- it stands for Boosting Engineering, Science and Technology -- drew several hundred teenagers, teachers and parents from across Kansas to Charles Koch Arena. One group drove over from Arkansas.

This year's theme dealt with the aging Hubble space telescope, which the students were told was in need of new batteries and a new motor.

During the competition, one person on the team operated a 10-foot boom that had a robot mounted on the opposite end. A teammate used the remote to maneuver the machine's claws.

With Justin Alexander maneuvering the boom and Anthony Peters operating the radio remote control, the Warriors' robot performed nearly flawlessly as it pulled eight used "batteries" from a model Hubble telescope and replaced them with eight new ones.

The pair then handed the telescope's "engine" to a team from Johnson County, and the Johnson County team safely inserted the engine into its proper slot. That feat gave each team 24 bonus points.

The Wichita Home School Warriors completed their first mission in two minutes and 20 seconds -- a full 40 seconds before a horn sounded the end of the round.

"That was better than I expected," Peters said after realizing that his team had tallied a perfect 124 points.

"That was amazing," Alexander said.

The Home School Warriors went on to take the first-place BEST award for the third consecutive year. They were one of 26 teams that took

part in the competition, which is designed to stimulate students' interest in pursuing college degrees and careers in engineering, science and technology. A handful of participants wore T-shirts that said, "My robot ate your robot for lunch."

Dick Holloway, a retired Boeing engineer, helped bring the BEST competition to Wichita after seeing a similar event at Texas A&M University. He said the first robotics competition was held in the 1980s at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where students competed with \$20,000 machines.

"We figured that out here in the Midwest, we didn't want to put that much money into something you only use once," he said.

Holloway said each team starts with identical robot kits, and the students are given six weeks to design and build their machines. Each kit has about \$900 worth of equipment, nearly all of which is reusable.

"Each team has four electric motors -- two big ones and two little ones -- and a radio remote control," he said.

Holloway said winners will move on to the regional robot competition at the University of Arkansas-Fort Smith.

"We're trying to get the kids interested in science and technology before they get to college, and I think we're succeeding," he said. "The kids who go through this program make really good college students."

Among those in the competition was Om Patel of Independence, who said he enjoys tinkering with electronic equipment.

"Our robot wasn't built as well as we thought," he said after a disappointing first round. "We only managed to score four points."

Reach Hurst Laviana at 268-6499 or hlaviana@wichitaeagle.com.