

Competitive season launches for robotics students



Education

Written by Kristin Babcock

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Ben McCall/Sun Photo At a club benefit breakfast, Robert Castaneda, 9, Overland Park, Launches a T-shirt toward a target with the help of student Chris Colvin, 16, Lenexa. The launcher, named Thor, was created by robotics club students at Shawnee Mission West, 8800 W. 85th St., Overland Park.

It is game time for robotics clubs.

The season kicked off Jan. 3 with a national simulcast that announced the type of robot competitors have to build. In six weeks, the robot must be ready to play.

At the beginning the challenge “always seems next to impossible,” said **David Blank**, junior at Shawnee Mission West, 8800 W. 85th St., Overland Park.

“I’m sure we’ll work something out,” David said.

Students like David, who participate in the For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology Robotics Competition, must complete a working robot that can play a specific game. Students learned this year the robot they will create must be able to play “Lunacy.” Their robot must maneuver on a low-friction board and tow “moon rocks.”

“This is one of the harder ones,” **Vicki Davis**, West robotics club sponsor, said. “It will be like driving down the icy roads of Kansas while opening a bottle of pop.”

West robotics club members gathered Jan. 3 to hear the announcement, take inventory of robot parts, and begin designing their robot.

The six weeks leading to competition will be “hectic” and “insane,” David said.

“It gets pretty crazy,” David said. “Last year there were nights we stayed until the janitors kicked us out.”

That work created Brynhildr, a robot that can lift a large ball. The club also created a robot one year for FIRST that they converted into the school's athletic event T-shirt launcher.

Within the next week, the 20-member team will likely have a prototype ready, Davis said. To do so they must brainstorm, design, vote and agree on a strategy for the competition.

"In every way this is like going to a state basketball championship," Davis said. "There is skill and strategy, and coaching is a big part. There is a lot of teamwork."

The intense six-week period gives "a taste of the real world," David said. All students must utilize physics, math, engineering, and problem solving skills to build a robot.

"We have deadlines and limited funds," David said. "It is preparing me for life after school."

Nearly 100 percent of robotics club members go on to work within or study engineering, Davis said. At this point **Jessica Casteel**, West freshman, is not sure if she wants to work in engineering, writing or forensic science. But she knew she wanted to be in the robotics club.

"This is something I like to do," Jessica said. "It is useful information and is something I look at as fun."

The regional FIRST competition will involve more than 50 teams.

The national FIRST competition is held in April in Atlanta, Ga. In 2008, more than 1,500 schools competed in FIRST.

FIRST was founded by **Dean Kamen**, the inventor of the Segway, to encourage high school students to enter engineering or technology fields.

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