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ROBOTICS COMPETITION



GRANT PARPAN PHOTO

The Longwood High School robotics team won the Team Spirit Award last weekend at the annual Long Island Regional FIRST Robotics Competition at Hofstra University. Longwood senior Danny Brooks was named MVP and the Lions finished ninth overall, their best-ever finish.

'The Super Bowl of Smarts'

Local schools compete at annual battle of brains

BY GRANT PARPAN | EDITOR

Danny Brooks held the ball up and paused for a moment as he homed in on his target. His teammates and parents of team members stood and cheered. A Lions mascot paced back and forth chanting "Go Longwood."

The stands at Hofstra University, where the Pride faithful normally cheer on their basketball team, shook as the 6-foot-3 senior sent his shot flying through the air.

No, this was not a Longwood basketball game. But those in attendance at this weekend's Long Island Regional FIRST Robotics Competition couldn't help but observe how similar the atmospheres are.

"It's like a Longwood-Patchogue Medford basketball game except there it's probably a little more bloodthirsty," said Longwood robotics team member Lisa Ortiz, a junior. "Here we root for each [team]."

And root they did this weekend. Longwood placed ninth out of 46 teams at the competition and Danny Brooks was named MVP. The team of 38 members also won the Team Spirit Award — for their nonstop support of each other — and coordinator Debbie Lang was honored with the Woodie Flowers Award, given annually to a dedicated mentor.

Both Mount Sinai and Miller Place high schools also competed, finishing 18th and 26th, respectively.

The FIRST robotics competition has been held on Long Island since 1999. Teams are given six weeks to build a 130-pound robot designed primar-

ily from a kit of parts and to fit certain specifications. Each year the components of the game change.

Regional winners compete at the world festival in Atlanta. Worldwide more than 1,300 teams compete in FIRST robotics.

"It's the 'Super Bowl of Smarts,'" Ms. Lang said.

This year's teams' objective was to score fewer points than their opponents by keeping balls out of their own cages. The human players, for Longwood it was Danny, are the only players allowed to touch the Nerflike balls used in the game, and they try to keep the balls from coming back into play near their team's cage.

Other players, meanwhile, control the robot during the two-minute games. As Lisa explained, some teams build robots that are more defensive, like Longwood's. Other teams, like Mount Sinai, build more offensive robots. Teams are grouped together with two allies throughout the competition and they work together in groups of three.

The competition goes on for three full days. Lisa estimated Longwood competed in more than 90 individual games during the competition, which was held Thursday, Friday and Saturday last week. Their ninth-place finish was their best ever, according to Ms. Lang. They finished 12th in 2005, she said.

"It was a lot of work," said Lisa, the unofficial team spokesperson, who added that the team would leave school at 6:30 each morning and not return until after 8 p.m. "There are three days of us having to keep our

spirits up as we lift big, heavy robots. And we do this for fun, which shows you how nerdy we are.

And it doesn't take long for the casual spectator to realize how much the students put into the competition. They construct and program the robots from scratch. Plus they build the control panels, which are hooked up to a computer and a webcam attached to the robot, so they can see what the robot is essentially seeing.

Different team members have different specialties and fill different jobs on the team. Lisa said that's the most interesting part of the team, the fact that you can have any set of skills and it can be applied.

This year Danny Brooks was the head of mechanics for Longwood, while Mike Fricke and Megan Bredes programmed the robot. Ryan Schlesinger built his own control panel. Scott Heredia was the team captain and the guy, along with mascot Maxwell Molinari, charged with getting the rest of the team pumped to cheer loudly and often — no easy feat when team members have been burning the candle at both ends for three straight days.

Lisa said the team members — many of them decked out in face paint, dyed hair and giant team-colored hats — drink coffee and energy drinks to keep up with the frantic pace on competition days and to keep the spirit alive. It's that part of the competition, where students stay loud and full of spirit that does most for the students, Lisa said. It breaks many of her friends out of their shells, she said.

"If they were at a party, a lot of them would be the last people to dance," Lisa said of her teammates. "Here they don't stop. You get a confidence you can't get from anywhere else."

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PUBLIC MEETINGS

MONDAY, APRIL 6

4 p.m. Brookhaven Town Planning Board,
Town Hall8 p.m. Mount Sinai Civic Association, Heri-
tage Center

BREAKING NEWS AS IT HAPPENS

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