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March 30, 2011



SCHOOLS

Clarke students look into the future

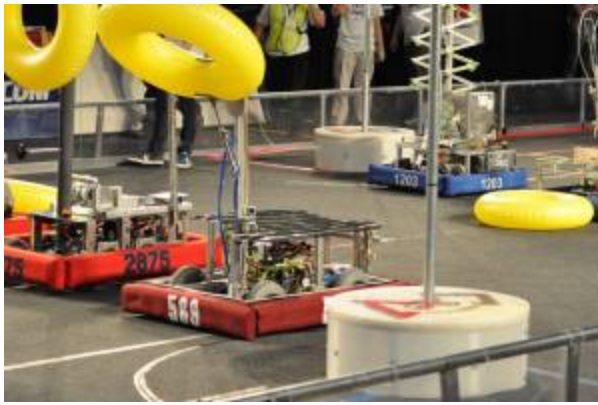
Aspiring engineers put robot to the test at SBPLI FIRST competition

By **Mike Caputo**



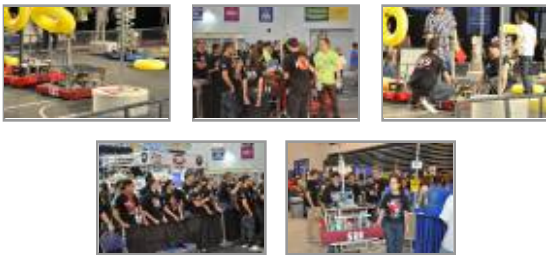
Ray Robichaud/Herald

A clip from the 2011 SBPLI FIRST Robotics Competition at Hofstra on March 25.



Ray Robichaud/Herald

W.T. Clarke High School's Team No 569 sent its homemade robot onto the field for the SBPLI FIRST Robotics Competition on March 25 at Hofstra.



An event involving racing robots and the formation of alliances could be straight out of a science fiction novel.

But such an event actually took place — for the 12th time — at Hofstra on March 25 and 26. W.T. Clarke High School was among 50 teams competing in the School Business Partnerships of Long Island Regional FIRST Robotics Competition at the David S. Mack Sports and Exhibition Center. Clarke did not qualify for the final round on Saturday afternoon.

Months of training and preparation were on display as Clarke put its robot to the test against others from across the county. It was the first competition for 16-year-old juniors Joseph Palazzolo and Jennifer Papazian, who plan to become engineers. They had a chance to operate the robot during one of the morning matches on Friday.

“It was an adrenaline rush,” Papazian said.

The SBPLI FIRST (For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology) competition creates a new mission, or game plan, for the robots each year. This year's game, entitled Lego Motion, was announced in early January, giving teams six weeks to construct their 120-pound robots.

The competition, which took place on a 27-by-54-foot field, pitted two alliances of three teams aiming to accumulate points. Points were attained by directing robots to collect triangular, circular and square Lego pieces, which were then hung by mini “bots” on the team's assigned poles on each side of the field.

Michael Connors, who graduated from Clarke in 1977, has mentored his alma mater's squad since the program's inception 10 years ago. In addition to a class during the school day, the robotics team meets after school and works on their robot for hours. Though the six-week window of preparation is a challenge, it introduces the students to hurdles that professional engineers face.

“This puts such a real-world spin on it because of the deadline,” Connors said.

And the team's work doesn't end the day of the competition. There is responsibility and pressure for every teammate, from those in charge of replacing batteries to the drivers controlling the robot on the field.

Connors said that students have tried to prove their supposed superior driving skills through their video gaming abilities. It's not the same, he explained. “Wait until you get into a real-world situation,” he said. “It's so dynamic that you have to be able to quickly make changes to your game plan.”

Palazzolo and his teammates worked on the fly to make adjustments to their robot, sometimes having less than 10 minutes before their next match.

“I like coming together with everybody and seeing the robot built from ground up,” Palazzolo said.

Although competition was fierce and spirited, organizers of the event agreed that participation in these programs opens doors for students, especially those seeking careers in engineering.

Scott Schuler, a Clarke alumnus, has mentored teams and is now a board member of SBPLI. He consults school districts that consider implementing the program. He encourages them to attend the competition, which makes the rest of his pitch simple.

“One hundred percent of the kids have a chance to become professional in what they’re doing here,” Schuler said. “What kind of sport has that?”

Dr. Lorraine Greenwald, a professor and dean of the School of Business at SUNY Farmingdale, said the students have a head start for college. “When they come into the university, they’re ready,” said Greenwald, who was an official at the Robotics competition. “It takes a little more than just the minimum to be successful, and these kids have it.”

Another official, Bob Martin, an engineer, said that carries over to the world of work. “The experience they have here is very, very close to the experience they will have when they join the industry,” Martin said.

Dr. Frank Saracino, an SBPLI board member and a retired superintendent of the East Meadow School District, said the organization’s aim is to keep talented students on Long Island after college. SBPLI, established in 1984, links schools and businesses to build an educated work force and create career opportunities for Long Island students.

“There are so many things that come out of it — life skills and social skills,” Saracino said. “We want to create jobs ... expand opportunities, at least.”

The East Meadow Chamber of Commerce and East Meadow Kiwanis are annual sponsors of Clarke’s robotics team, as well as Heads Up Construction of Westbury.

Malverne High School was the only Nassau County school to be chosen for the national finals in June in St. Louis. Though his team of about 30 students didn’t make it to the final round in last weekend’s regional competition, Connors said the students were enthusiastic when they returned to school on Monday.

“The kids were absolutely thrilled even though we lost,” said Connors, who led Clarke to the national finals in 2004. “They came in really excited and talked about next year.”