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## LEARNING SCIENCE, WITH BLOOD, SWEAT AND GEARS . . .At the robot races

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EAST PROVIDENCE - Kevin Golinveaux tried to keep his hands from shaking. The competition was about to begin and he focused on one thing: lining up his team's toy robot, a three-wheeled machine made of Lego blocks, gears and a small computer.

Aim it wrong, and the robot might run into the miniature staircase or the small table positioned on an 8-by-4-foot obstacle course.

Golinveaux and his three teammates - all freshmen at North Kingstown High School -- were competing yesterday in the Fourth Annual Rhode Island Robotics First Lego **League** Tournament, held at East Providence High School.

The contest challenged students to design, build and program small robots to accomplish certain tasks: moving a computer disk, shooting a basket, retrieving a pair of glasses, and climbing some stairs.

They used robot kits sold by Lego, the maker of the popular toy bricks. Some 400 students, ages 9 to 14, from 40 Rhode Island schools participated.

The theme this year was using robotics to find solutions to problems faced by people with physical disabilities. Besides the robotic competition, students were also required to submit a research project that demonstrated a solution to an accessibility problem in a school or building.

Students and their coaches spent several months getting ready for yesterday's contest. Many teams designed the robots with removable attachments that performed specific tasks. One attachment with long arms could hold a ball the size of a tangerine and could place it in a basket; another attachment might be used to pick up a CD-ROM and place it on another part of the course.

Each team had three turns, 2 1<sup>3</sup>2 minutes each, to accomplish the tasks, getting points for each success.

"I've been pretty amazed at some of the things I've seen today," said Jeff Sefranek, one of the 40 volunteer referees who helped judge the contest. "These kids are pretty smart."

Robotics is becoming part of the everyday curriculum at many schools, said Rebekah Gendron, an East Providence teacher and director of this year's competition. She teaches robotics full-time at Riverside Middle School.

"With technology and the way things are going now, it's robotic everything," she said. There are robotic legs for soldiers, allowing them to lift heavy items. And of course there are the robots that are exploring distant planets, such as Huygens, which touched down on the Saturn moon Titan last week.

Robotics involves many disciplines and helps students develop several skills, including problem solving, math, science and critical thinking.

Some found the task too daunting. Gendron said that one teacher told her that all the boys on the school's robotics team quit, saying it was just too hard. But the girls on the team persisted and represented the school at yesterday's event.

The North Kingstown team, the Robo Skippers, watched intently as Kevin Golinveaux lined up its electronic contraption.

The four-member team -- Kevin, Joe Kerwood, John Chase and Garrett Romano -- began construction of the robot in October, working once or twice a week.

When the buzzer rang, the robot sprang forward, rolling toward the side of the mini-stairs. Just in time, it turned to go behind the stairs and squeezed through a narrow space. It turned right, and pushed open a gate. The robot did just as the kids had programmed it to do.

"Yeah, we did it!" shouted teammate Joe.

Their robot completed several other tasks, including making a basket, moving chairs into position, placing a basket of "food" on a tiny table, and finally, ascending the three-step staircase.

The four students gave themselves high-fives. They went on to win the robotic performance part of the competition.

\* \* \*

Robo champs

\* The winners in yesterday's Fourth Annual Rhode Island Robotics First Lego **League** Tournament:

Robo Skippers, North Kingstown High School.

Fellowship of the Robot, Our Lady of Mercy, East Greenwich.

The Handibots, Gordon School, East Providence.

The overall winner of the competition, which included a research project and points awarded for programming, design and teamwork, was the Fellowship of the Robot, Our Lady of Mercy, East Greenwich. That team will

represent the state at the First Lego **League** World Festival to be held in April in Atlanta.

\* \* \*

Fifth graders Dan Curry, left, and Michael Fairbanks from Henry Barnard School, in Providence, launch their robot at the Fourth Annual Rhode Island Robotics First Lego **League** Tournament, held yesterday at East Providence High School.

\* \* \*

David Asselin, left, and Justin Yehle, of the Falcons team from Knotty Oak Middle School, in Coventry, root on their robot yesterday. Some 400 students, ages 9 to 14, from 40 schools participated.

\* \* \*

Shirley Seri, a fifth grader at Henry Barnard School, in Providence, anxiously watches the competition. The students used kits sold by Lego to create their entries.

JOURNAL PHOTOS / JOHN FREIDAH

\* \* \*

Alexis Piccirillo, 10, left, and Kate Fusco, 10, from the Capt. Isaac Paine School in Foster, show off their entry under the eyes of the judges yesterday. Students were also required to submit a research project that demonstrated a solution to a building-accessibility problem.

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