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ROBOTS RULE - A good lesson: never give up

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Despite a shaky start, the Kickemuit teams tweak their robots and persevere and end up placing better than anyone had expected.

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EAST PROVIDENCE - Nearly everything that could have went wrong for the Kickemuit Middle School's Lego robotics teams did Saturday, the day of their first Lego **League** competition. But one of the teams ended up third and the other finished in the middle of the pack.

Their laptop, which programs the robots, didn't have the necessary equipment to work. Important floppy discs were left at the school. The engineer was missing in action. Two students, who helped build the robots, couldn't attend and the robot itself broke in two during the first round.

It was a hard lesson the students and coaches didn't anticipate.

"The kids are learning Murphy's Law today [Saturday]," said one coach Toby Liebowitz while laughing. "Or maybe even the chaos theory. Either way, I'm really proud of them and no matter how they finish, we'll be

better as a team."

The two teams the school's third, younger team did not compete arrived shortly after 8 a.m. at East Providence High School, the host for the second Rhode Island Robotics Lego **League** Competition: City Sights.

The dozen or so students were dressed in matching purple-and-white athletic outfits with a wildcat design and the word "Kickemuit."

For six weeks, the teams built robots out of Legos and programmed them to move up and down, forward and backward, left and right and combinations of the directions.

The theme of the competition was to create a robot that can perform "mundane, dangerous and strenuous" duties for a city real or imagined with a large population and a high demand for land, water power and other resources. Coaches said the students used a number of disciplines social studies, math, science and English to be successful.

Kickemuit chose a city in New Jersey because of its increased pollution.

Two playing fields were joined back to back and the opposing teams had three rounds, 2 1/2 minutes per round, to have their robot complete certain tasks. The team earned points for each completed task.

Among the duties was the removal of rocks off a soccer field, repairing a bridge that had been damaged by the wind, moving modular housing out of a river's floodplain to a safer area and harvesting plants and delivering the crop to the city's market.

Points were taken away if the robot knocked down any bushes, trees or plants in the playing field. In addition to the competition, the teams also had to give two presentations.

The Kicke Wildcats and Kicke Colts were excited. They were ready.

Their equipment, however, wasn't. One of the two portable laptops wouldn't communicate with the robot and some of the floppy discs were missing. The first obstacle was to share the remaining computer.

During round one, the Kicke Colts's robot tipped over and broke in two when it attempted to travel over the playing field bridge. David and Danny Shears, identical twins, scrambled to put the robot back together.

Chelsea Schinigio, 14, covered her face in despair as time ran out.

"Don't give up," emcee Jim Dolan said as they walked away from the field.

The Kicke Wildcats did better, putting up scores that ranked them in the middle of the 36 competing teams.

"We found out we could take care of the bridge, but it was like two seconds off," said Mitchell Dell, 12, of the Wildcats. "We can do it, I know we can."

Meanwhile, Zachary Silva scouted the other teams robots. Learning from others designs can be useful for future competitions, the coaches told him.

Extra Legos from a nearby container kept the Colts robot together for round two. Their score also improved, but the team placed toward the bottom of the pack.

"At least it didn't break," said Mason Scott, a member of the school's younger team who came to support the Colts and Wildcats.

"It did the rocks [on the soccer field] and the bridge also," Danny Shears responded.

The Wildcats, on the other hand, had moved up to eighth place after their second round turn. Neither team stopped working on their robots during the lunch break.

Several tweaks and an hour later, the Wildcats's robot was sporting new wheels. It was their last chance and the team wanted to remain in the top 10. The Colts, who finished and improved in their third round, stayed to cheer on the Wildcats.

"One hundred-sixty four points," screamed Brett Dupre, 13. "We got 164 points! We're in the third place. YES!"

Eight teams, however, needed to complete the third round. As each team finished, the Wildcats scurried to the judge's table. One team, the Riverside Middle School Wind Surfers, tied, but their previous round scores did not give them enough to push the Wildcats out of third.

The Colts won first place for the Against All Odds award and placed third for the performance award. There were about 25 awards given out in all.

"I figured we'd be in the middle of the pack or lower because of all those obstacles," said Jim Zito, another coach for the school's program. "Yet, they plowed through and right into third."

His son, Mike Zito, a Wildcat, said, "I didn't think we were going to make it through either, but we never gave up. We never give up."

* * *

BATTLING ROBOTS: Left, three Kickemuit Middle School students, Danny Shears, Zach Silva and David Shears (Danny's twin brother), prepare one of the school's entries in the second Rhode Island Robotics Lego **League** Competition: City Sights at East Providence High School on Saturday. One of the team's entries, nicknamed Charlie, being tweaked for competition.

JOURNAL PHOTO / GLENN OSMUNDSON

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WORKING IT OUT: The Kickemuit Middle School team preparing in the East Providence High School cafeteria for the second Rhode Island Robotics Lego **League** Competition: City Sights.

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