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EDUCATION - Building interest in science

MARIA ARMENTAL JOURNAL STAFF WRITER

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BRISTOL

FighterBot "The Tank" was ready for action.

After working out a few kinks in the "pit," a converted gym space with mock game boards, the sixth graders from Narragansett Pier School and their Lego robot had mastered the pacemaker mission: The Tank had to get around a broken bone and install a pacemaker in the heart -- and do so before the other team.

The twist: RoboxerZ, rookies in the robotics championship, would face Robeau Lego, the top-ranked team in round 1 and number 2 last year.

FighterBot bolted toward the pacemaker and completed the task seamlessly - only Robeau Lego's Squeak was faster, by about a second.

Fifty-eight teams of 9- to 14-year-olds competed Saturday in the 10th annual First Lego **League** Rhode Island robotics championship for a chance to take on the best teams from around the world on April 27 to 30 in St. Louis, Mo. Members of the top team also won a \$5,000 scholarship, renewable for four years, to Roger Williams University, which hosts the state competition.

The goal, organizers say, is to get students interested in science and technology.

This year's competition, "Body Forward," challenged the students to build a robot out of Lego pieces and attempt to complete a series of "missions" related to biomedical engineering - from dispensing medicine to inserting a stent to widen a constricted artery.

Students were also judged on their robot's quality, a research project and their adherence to core values, such as teamwork and sportsmanship.

More than 20,000 teams were competing in similar challenges in more than 40 countries, said Matthew Stein, an engineering professor at Roger Williams University and master of ceremonies of the state competition Saturday.

"We are relying on you to be the job creators, innovators of tomorrow," said U.S. Rep. James R. Langevin, who attended the robotics competition as a guest speaker.

"There's nothing that you can't accomplish in your life if you set your mind to it, but you have to try," Langevin told the students before kicking off the competition with a "3, 2, 1, Legos!"

As in any good competition, this one was all about strategy: selecting the missions that would score the team the highest points in the least amount of time. Points on the robotics challenge were based on the best scores in three 2½-minute rounds.

The more experienced teams relied on light and motion sensors that helped guide the robot. Newbies opted for the less reliable point-and-shoot approach.

Molly McGreevy, RoboxerZ's team manager, said her team's sensors didn't work, so they had to go with the more laborious recalibration: judging by eye, then adjusting the computer program and synchronizing it to the robot. Time and time again.

Then, one of the programs got deleted, so FighterBot could not complete one of the missions.

They picked up the pieces - literally, as Legos fell off at one point -- and rallied for another round.

"I think we can definitely win for team spirit or fun," Thomas Beck, one of the team's programmers, cheered on.

"Ready for takeoff!" Beck called as the team went in for their next match.

RoboxerZ, tied at 39th after round 1, ended up in the middle of the pack.

First Lego **League** Rhode Island

Champion's award: S.M.A.R.T. (St. Mary Academy Robotics Team), St. Mary

Academy-Bay View, East Providence.*

2nd place: Robeau Lego, home-based team of students from Providence and Massachusetts.

3rd place: ASA

Transformers, All Saints Academy, Middletown.

marmenta@projo.com / 277-7405 *Winner moves on to FLL World Festival. *Winner moves on to FLL World Festival.

Caption: Julia Cox and Ben Hancox, of the Robeau Lego team, compete at the Rec Center & Gym at Roger Williams University in Bristol, which hosted the 10th annual First Lego League Rhode Island robotics championship for boys and girls ages 9 to 14.

Avery Weckman, left, of the RoboxerZ team from Narragansett Pier School, watches referee Harry

Johnson fill in the score at the end of the team's event. At right, Aidan Mazagonwalla and Soli Saqib, from Hyper Green Oreos team of Lincoln, make adjustments to a prosthetic leg as part of their exhibit. Below, the Bio-Bots team makes last-minute adjustments to its Lego robot on a practice arena.

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