



*Am. News 4/15/04
Dimensions of
Living Section*

INVENTIVE: The Smithtown High School Robotics Team is bringing its "botmobile" to the Georgia Dome in Atlanta, where it will compete in the FIRST Robotics national championship April 15-17.

Botmobile moves like a champion

Robotics team in Georgia for nationals

By **PHYLLIS LADER**



While their classmates returned to school Wednesday after spring break, 17 members of the Smithtown High School Robotics Team headed to Atlanta with their "botmobile" to participate in the 2004 FIRST (For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology) Robotics national championship at the Georgia Dome, April 15 to 17.

The Smithtown team will vie for awards as well as scholarships. At the 2003 national championships,

Long Island students walked away with over \$400,000 in college scholarships.

Smithtown Robotics Team coach Chuck Dennis said that this is one contest where there are many ways to become a winner. Design excellence, competitive play, and sportsmanship all earn recognition.

"The main thing in this competition is gracious professionalism. If there's another robot that's better

than ours and it was damaged in a previous competition, we would give them the part they needed even if we knew we would be battling them in the next round," said Mr. Dennis. "We're there to help any team. The way the competition is structured, where you have two teams going against two other teams, you might be going against a certain team in one

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Robotics team competing at nationals

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round, but they might be with you two rounds later."

Each team received a kit of parts on January 10 and had six weeks from that date to design and build a robot weighing no more than 130 pounds. The robots then competed in the year's designated game at regional competitions. At the Long Island regional, held March 18-20 at Suffolk Community College in Brentwood, Smithtown shared second place honors with East Meadow and Pierson High School. That qualified them for the 2005 national championship; their entrance into the 2004 nationals was based on last year's performance. Although they didn't fare as well at a subsequent regional event at Drexel University in Philadelphia, Mr. Dennis said they learned from the experience. Also among the qualifiers for this year's nationals was the Hauppauge High School Robotics Team, which took the Leadership In Control award and the Johnson & Johnson Sportsmanship Award at the Long Island regionals.

This year's game is called

"First Frenzy: Raising The Bar." It takes place on a playing field with a mix of robot and human players. Robots and humans alike can earn points by throwing balls into goals, and extra points are given to the team who ends up with its robot hanging from the pull-up bar in the center of the field.

"This is the third year that Smithtown has been part of this competition and the robots have gotten better each year," said Mr. Dennis, a former aerospace engineer who teaches robotics and flight at the Smithtown High School Freshman Campus. "This year we have an arm and it works great. It has control over the ball."

In each match, one individual on a team drives the robot, one controls the function, such as lifting the ball, one throws the ball (the human player) and one person coaches, watching the scores. "The coach serves as the eyes on the field, informing the driver and shooter of what's going on in the field. The points change rapidly," said Mr. Dennis.

The game involves multiple strategies and twists, he added,

such as wanting the other team to score as close to your number of points as possible, allowing you to capture their points. Rather than having a blowout victory, "you want to win, but you want to win by a close margin," he explained.

Mr. Dennis, who is aided by assistant coach Mike Colletta, said there are 45 students, grades 9-12, who are in the Smithtown Robotics Club. In addition to learning about design and engineering, the students learn valuable lessons about teamwork, graciousness, and courtesy, he said.

"No matter how we place, the main thing in any competition is that we leave having had a good time," he said.

Mr. Dennis credited his team's sponsors for providing valuable support. The sponsors include A & E Auto Filters, Anorad Corporation, Cubitek, Inc., Festo Corporation, JFM Technologies, Inc., National Science Industries, Reuters, the Smithtown School District, Fortunoff, Keyspan Energy, Precision Stone, Inc. Smithtown Rotary Club, BAE Systems and Metal Connections.