

Tech kids make those rockin' robots battle it out

Smithtown, Hauppauge high schools in robotics competition March 18 – 19

BY LAURA WEIR

Come and see those robots rock as Smithtown and Hauppauge high schools once again compete in the annual FIRST Robotics Competition to be held this year at Hofstra University on March 18 and 19.

Students will arrive at the school on Thursday, March 17 to unpack, inspect and set up their mechanical monsters, which will compete against other robots in a series of challenges for the ultimate robotics championship.

The Smithtown High School robot, named Sir Lancebot in keeping with a Mid-evil theme, was completed by 47 team members all heavily involved in science and technology. These students are working their way toward a bright future in the world of business.

"Robotics is up and coming," said Smithtown technology teacher Chuck Dennis. "China is building

robots. They're basically building a soccer team. Their robots will be coming against world class soccer players, probably sometime in the next 15 years."

Dennis said that robots will someday be a part of everyday life in schools all over the world. "Now they're becoming more and more of a toy that's actually working," he said. "When those elementary school kids get to high school now, robots are going to be a part of their lives."

Smithtown Superintendent of Schools Charles Planz gave the district the go-ahead to start the program four years ago and the team has been successful ever since. "I was thinking about starting it, but when Dr. Planz wanted to do it, that's what really got the ball rolling," Dennis said. "Every year we've made it to the championship competition."

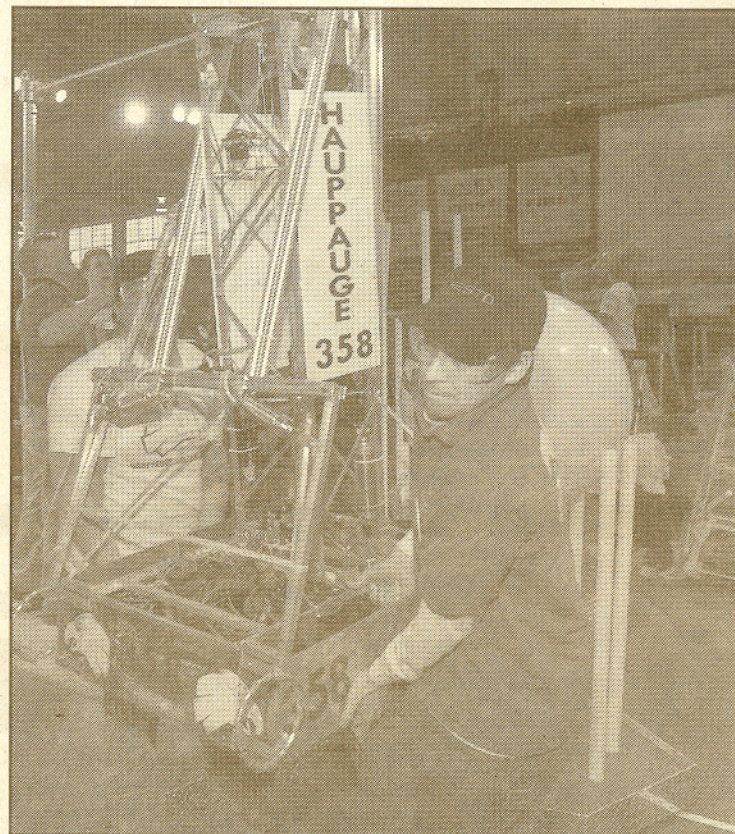
Dennis and Bob Wentzel, the Smithtown robotics team co-advisor, whose son is on the team, brought Smithtown to second place in last year's competition. "We made it all the way to the finals and then we lost by five points," Dennis said.

Hauppauge High School has been no slouch either. In its sixth year, the team has been a force to be reckoned with, making it to the semifinals and the division finals last year. "In the nationals, we got as far as we've ever gotten," said Hauppauge physics teacher and team advisor Ken Tiu.

Parents of robotics students praise the program and say it is a great way to get kids involved in a useful learning experience.

"The club is kids working with kids," said Rose Morales, whose son, Bryan, a senior at Hauppauge High School, has been involved with robotics since the ninth grade. "The seniors work with the freshmen. Nobody's a low life. It's a wonderful experience for them."

Morales and several others started a parents' booster club to help fund future robotics competitions. Several Hauppauge businesses are also involved, including FESTO Corporation, which looks forward to employing some of the youngsters upon graduation.



Photos by Robert O'Rourke

(Above) At last year's competition, Billy Gehrhardt and Ken Tiu from Hauppauge High School carry their robot to the court at the Brentwood Campus of Suffolk Community College. (Below, left) Ian Woloschin, Mr Pinter (back to camera), Chuck Dennis (team advisor), Dan Lopuch and Anthony Camizzi from Smithtown High School work on their robot in between matches at last year's event.

"It's good for the local possibilities, but we have facilities in 10 different locations in the country, so we think it's good overall," said Scott Schuler, manager of marketing at FESTO, a company that manufactures and sells robotic components and systems for industrial application, such as assembly line manufacturing.

As a Hauppauge High School team mentor since the beginning, Schuler said the program is far and away one of the best any high school can offer. "It's incredible," he said. "I really appreciate the value of this to kids. It really builds a sense of accomplishment and teamwork just like any high school team sport, but the by-product of this is real employable skills."

