

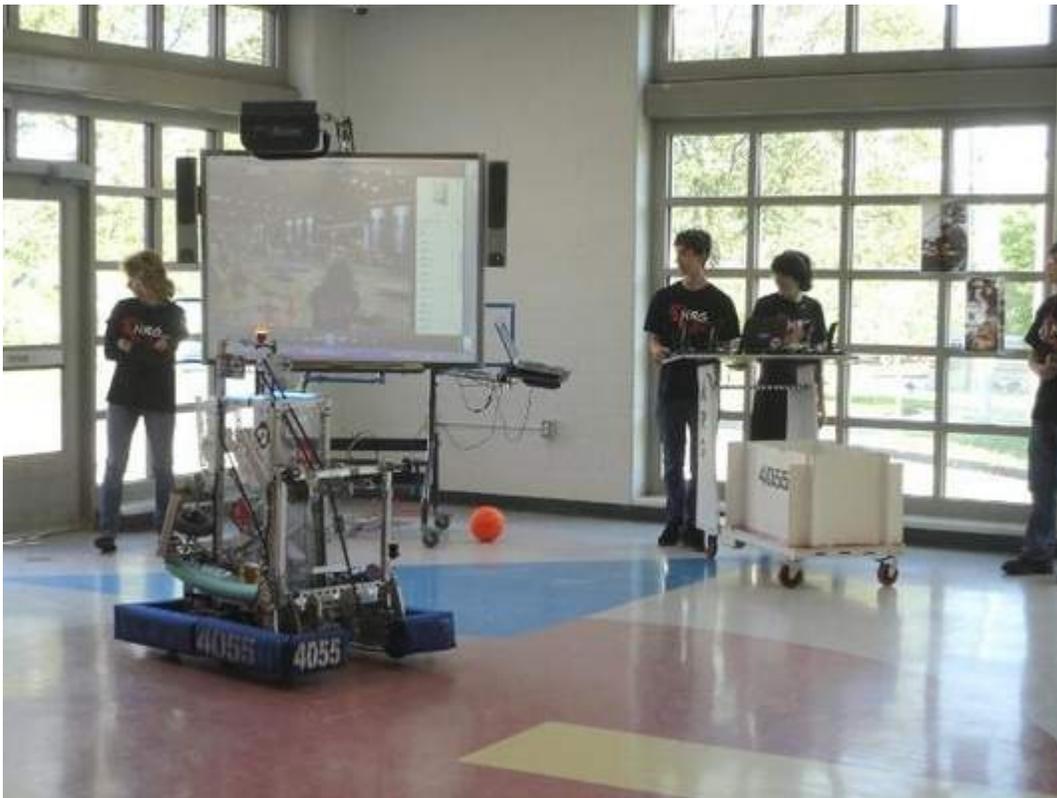
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By JASON SIEDZIK

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Region 7 Gearheads show off robotics prowess



The Northwestern Gearheads put their robot through the paces to help convince the Region 7 Board of Education to support more science, technology, engineering and mathematics education. (JASON SIEDZIK / Register Citizen)

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WINSTED -- Tangible proof of the benefits of science, technology, engineering and mathematics education was on display Wednesday night at Northwestern Regional High School.

Having returned triumphantly from the International FIRST Championships, the Northwestern Gearheads wheeled their robots onto the Northwestern Regional High School cafeteria for a demonstration of their prowess -- and as a chance to push for more science, technology, engineering and mathematics classes.

"People came up to us and told us they were impressed," said Shane Cyr of the Gearheads.

The Gearheads capped off an impressive rookie campaign at the International Championships for FIRST -- which stands for For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology -- by taking 22nd place out of 100 in their league and consequently winning another award. The team initially punched its ticket to the international championships in St. Louis by winning the Rookie All-Star Award in the regional championships.

Although the Gearheads finished in 24th place out of 64 teams in the regional competition, the team won the rookie award after impressing the competition with not only their technical prowess, but also their sportsmanship, professionalism and business plan. FIRST emphasizes "coopertition," as the FIRST website describes the mix of cooperation and competition, and the highest awards in FIRST are actually given to teams for their performance off the field.

Part of the Gearheads success was their willingness to take on the duties of a role player. This year's challenge for FIRST competitions was a modified game of basketball, calling for teams to harvest basketballs and cross the court by either using balance bridges or rolling over a low barricade. Teams were given the freedom to build their robots in whatever way would help complete the task while complying with the rules.

Cyr admitted that the Gearheads knew they would not be able to shoot with the more experienced teams, so the team built its robot for defense and scooping up loose balls, much like a less colorful Dennis Rodman. According to Cyr, that meant using six-wheel-drive and high-traction wheels to easily negotiate the carpet and Lexan bridges.

"We were the bridge masters," said Cyr.

Another aspect of the robot that Cyr said their teammates appreciated was the arm, which was used to lower the bridges between the two halves of the field and muscle out other competitors. The Gearheads also modeled their robot's shooting mechanism on a softball pitching machine, which would be strong enough to fire outlet passes across the entire 57-foot field.

The achievements of the Gearheads were even more impressive, said several team members, because of the relative inexperience of the team. Cyr remarked that "our programming team didn't know a single line of Java before they came into this," and the next step to greater heights would come thanks to more science and technology classes at Region 7 schools.

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