

Northwest Regional Gearheads win Rookie All-Star award at regional robotics competition

By JASON SIEDZIK

Register Citizen Staff

WINSTED — Northwest Regional High School made quite an impression in its first turn at the FIRST robotics competition.

The Northwest Robotics Gearheads, which launched just months ago, won the Rookie All-Star award at the Hartford regional competition on March 29. According to Liza Bocchichio, the Gearheads were just one of four teams at the regional competition to win an invitation to the FIRST Robotics Championship in St. Louis, thanks to their strong showing.

"That's how we want to get there," said Bocchichio of the award.

Started by inventor and entrepreneur Dean Kamen, FIRST — which stands for For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology — is meant to foster interest in science, technology, engineering and math. Cooperation and collaboration are encouraged just as much as competition, with teams building robots to accomplish a specific task.

Getting a team off the ground is difficult enough, Bocchichio said, due to the need to raise funds and gather sponsors. Once support is in place, though, the build process is another kind of chaos, as teams have just six weeks from the official unveiling to design and build their robots. None of the details about the task are released before the kickoff event, but teams are given some of the necessary supplies.

"Everything for us has been last minute," Bocchichio said.

Every year features a different game, with teams of three robots collaborating on a task. This year, the game was a modified version of basketball titled Rebound Rumble, with

robots trying to shoot basketballs through their own goals before trying to balance on bridges in the middle of the court. The first 15 seconds of the game called for robots to operate independently, although Microsoft Kinect gestural controls could be used. Once that period ended, drivers would be able to remotely control their robots.

Games typically call for diverse fields of expertise, in keeping with FIRST's mission. The official game manual includes one example of this emphasis, as teams typically have to come up with creative solutions due to financial and technical constraints.

"For example," the manual states, "if a team obtains a gearbox from a power drill and modifies it to use on the Robot, they gain insight into the design of the original gearbox purpose, learn to characterize the performance of the original design, and implement the engineering design process to create their customized application for the gearbox."

Only four rookie teams had functional robots at the regional competition, Bocchichio said, adding that "a lot of rookie teams don't get a robot in their first year." However, even though the Northwest Robotics Gearheads lacked the experience of some of their Connecticut opponents — the oldest team in the state, the Berlin High School-based Technonuts, have been around since 1994 — the

Gearheads had a strong debut, taking 22nd place out of 64 teams.

Southington's Cyber Knights and Hartford's Birds of Prey were the top scorers, winning berths in the international championship. Northwestern's Gearheads could join them, as their Rookie All-Star award includes the \$5,000 entrance fee, but the Gearheads will need to raise more money to pay their way to St. Louis. The award, and berth in the international championships, was a surprise, according to Bocchichio, who said "now we're kind of scrambling to get the funds."

"We have about 20 kids on our team who really want to go," Bocchichio said.

In order to help raise the necessary funds, the team will hold a Benefit Blast at Northwestern Regional High School on April 14, running from 7:30 to 10:30 p.m. Tickets, which are \$15 per person, are available at the Beekley Community Library and Bakerville Library in New Hartford, and the Benefit Blast includes a DJ, hors d'oeuvres and a silent auction. Donations can also be made to the team at Regional School District 7.

"These kids have worked their butts off for six weeks," Bocchichio said.

For more information on the Gearheads, visit <http://www.nrg4055.org>, or for more information on FIRST, visit <http://www.usfirst.org>.