

Regional robotics teams build on each others' strengths

By JAYATI RAMAKRISHNAN
East Oregonian

As four robots, each created by a different team of students, enter the ring, there's more on the line than winning a competition.

"The number one thing that makes a good robot is teamwork," said sixth-grader Annette Allen, of Pendleton's Sunridge Middle School.

Each round of the FIRST Tech Challenge, part of a nationwide robotics league, tests the skills of each group. But it also requires them to work outside their team. During each round of competition, they are assigned "alliances" with other groups, and two teams will work together to score points.

"The robots have the same general outline every year, but have different goals," said Maddie Thompson, a junior on Pendleton High School's robotics team.

In this year's competition, the goal is to move pieces of debris, called "elements," into the center of the arena, either on the ground or into a "moon lander," an object in the middle of the arena. There are two corners of the arena called craters, which are filled with silver (whiffle balls) and gold (blocks). The robots have to move those elements to the center of the arena, either by pushing them into a square on the ground, or by depositing them into the "moon lander," an object in the center of the arena. The robots can also score points by climbing onto the moon lander.

"If you can get up from the ground with nothing touching, that's 80 points, which is amazing," said Elizabeth Benedict, a Sunridge Middle School seventh-grader.

Nineteen middle and high school teams from Umatilla, Pendleton, La Grande and Cove were at the Pendleton Convention Center on Saturday, hoping to use the competition to make it to the next round, the February "superqualifier" in Hillsboro.

The competition tests students' coding skills as well as direct control of the robot. During the "autonomous" portion, team members have 30 seconds to pre-program instructions to a smartphone that controls the robot.

"You can tell it, if you see this color, you must be here, or if you identify this picture, you must be at this location," said Collin Rovey, an eighth-grader on the robotics team from Cove. "Eight seconds after that, we have the driver-controlled portion, where



Staff photo by Kathy Aney
Collin Tovey, Taylor Fox and Connor Kimbro, of Cove's Nerd Herd team, work together to control their robot as it completes a variety of tasks Saturday at the Pendleton Convention Center.



Staff photo by Kathy Aney
Freddie Schrier and Annette Allen, of Sunridge Middle School, work together to control their robot as it completes a variety of tasks Saturday at the Pendleton Convention Center. Their team name, G.I.R.L.S., stands for Girls in Robotics Lovin' Science.

you can switch programs and do everything off the controller."

Sunridge Middle School had an all-girl team, the "G.I.R.L.S.," or Girls in Robotics Lovin' Science, team. As they started their first competition of the day, Freddie Schrier directed Allen, who drove the robot, named "Eve" after the movie "Wall-E."

"Nice try," she cheered her teammate, as the robot bumped into the wall. "Go back, try again."

The G.I.R.L.S. team said they all have different tasks — one is the robot's primary driver, one focuses on coding, and one is the build director — but they make it a point to spend time learning the other skills, in case they need to step in for each other.

A team of Pendleton high-schoolers said they've also learned to focus on doing one task really well, utilizing their alliances with other teams.

"Our main goal was to climb, and we can pretty much climb every time," said junior Landon Thornburg. "We wanted to use elements, but we focused on one thing at a time. Having two teams that can do one thing reliably is better."

Rovey said he and his team, all eighth-graders, based their robot's core design off the instructions on the FIRST website, but made some changes as they went along.

"We increased the boom (the arm that picked up items), and replaced a bucket with a claw," he said. They removed a second

motor that wasn't working effectively.

Other teammates maintain the engineering notebook, where they take pictures, diagram their plans, and keep track of the building process. The engineering notebook becomes part of each team's score.

"Even if they don't place top 10 in the robotics competition, they could still advance," said organizer Curt Thompson. "They're scored on teamwork, their response, the engineering notebook. It's not just the competition."

As the teams worked, a group of Umatilla High School students were there as mentors for younger students. The group of seven high-schoolers are in their own competition league, the First Robotics Challenge (FRC) league.

"I help out with programming and software issues," said Naomi Wyckoff, a UHS junior. She said part of the job is stepping away, and letting the younger students figure things out for themselves. "The code they use is different from mine now," Wyckoff said. "But it's really cool seeing all the kids who want to work hard. Sometimes you have to let them make their own mistakes."

Like many students in the robotics program, Wyckoff said she hopes to go into technology or science after high school.

"I want to go into hardware or software development," she said. "And hopefully I can come back and mentor these teams, too."

Irrigon rape defendant returns to county jail

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HEPPNER — Rape defendant Eduardo Salas of Irrigon is back in the Umatilla County Jail after bailing out in 2017.

Salas, 61, has pleaded not guilty to one count of attempted first-degree sexual abuse, two counts of first-degree rape and nine counts of first-degree sexual abuse for harming two girls younger than 12 between April 1, 2016, and May 28, 2017. He posted \$10,000 bail on July 27, 2017, and had to live under security release conditions, including not having contact with either victim and staying at least 500 feet from them.

The Morrow County Sheriff's Office arrested Salas on Jan. 7 and returned him to the Pendleton jail for violating conditions of his release. Deputy district attorney Richard Tovey in court documents stated Salas should remain in jail after coming too near one of the victims.

Tovey in his declaration to the court stated Morrow

County sheriff's deputy Lance Bose responded to a report from a relative of a victim in the case. That led Bose to review security camera footage showing Salas was within 500 feet of one victim for 6-8 minutes at a gas station. Bose also contacted Salas who said he was at the station but did not recognize the girl.

Circuit Judge Eva Temple in response signed the warrant for Salas' arrest and upped his bail to \$300,000.

District Attorney Justin Nelson on Jan. 9 asked the court to allow the sheriff's office to use an electric stun belt and belly chains on Salas when he is court based upon a recommendation from the sheriff's office. Circuit Judge Jon Lieuallen approved that request Jan. 10. Lieuallen also noted the court would review the necessity for the restraints with prosecution and defense attorneys before hearings begin.

The next proceeding in the case is a trial readiness hearing Thursday.

BRIEFLY

Symphony begins rehearsals for spring

HERMISTON — Rehearsals for the spring concerts of the Willow Creek Symphony recently started.

The preparatory orchestra of the Inland Northwest Musicians, the ensemble features younger musicians or adults who may have recently picked up their instruments again. No auditions are required to participate. The group is rehearsing each Tuesday from 6-7:30 p.m. at Armand Larive Middle School, 1497 S.W. Ninth St., Hermiston.

The Willow Creek Symphony will perform free concerts Thursday, March 14 at the Hermiston Community Center and Saturday, March 16 at Lone Community School. The performance times will be announced.

Founded in 1999, Inland Northwest Musicians is committed to providing live musical performances to rural audiences. It fosters an atmosphere of encouragement and assists musicians in developing their talent.

For information, contact 541-289-4696, inwm@machmedia.net or inlandnorthwestmusicians.com.

Libraries set kids reading promotion

Children who use their Ready 2 Learn library card in the month of January will be entered in a drawing for a chance to win an early learning gift pack.

As a way to encourage early learning and visits to the library, the promotion is open to children ages 0 to 5 with a Ready 2 Learn card. The program is available at most libraries in Umatilla and Morrow counties.

For more information, visit ready2learnoregon.weebly.com, search Facebook or stop by your local library.

Guide offers help to family, caregivers

PENDLETON — A free online resource guide for family caregivers and seniors was recently launched by Prestige Care, which is the parent company of McKay Creek Estates in Pendleton.

People are encouraged to check out the site, which provides information about changes in daily living that come with age. The Senior Guide to Healthy, Fulfilled Living covers topics that older adults and their loved ones experience. Visit prestige-care.com/they-deserve-the-best.

Commission to plan last five years of downtown improvement projects

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In the 15 years since the city of Pendleton established the urban renewal district, it's spent \$5 million into improvement projects in downtown Pendleton and the surrounding area. It will be tasked with spending another \$5 million before the district expires in four years.

How the city spends the money as the district's time winds down to its 2023 demise will be the subject of the Pendleton Development Commission on Tuesday.

The commission's advisory committee prepared a report that went over the city's options.

The urban renewal had made its largest investment — \$1.4 million — in its façade grant program.

But applications are slowing as the list of eligible buildings dwindle, and

one of its other marquee programs, the upper story grant program, has been slow to pick up as property owners say renovation in their second story spaces is still too expensive even with an incentive.

The report states that activity could pick up now that the upper story grant has been increased from 25 percent to 40 percent or the growth in the unmanned aerial systems industry increases demand for second story housing in the downtown area.

But how often the urban renewal district's incentive programs are used is largely out of the development commission's hands.

"However, even with the PDC's program grants as incentives, it is up to the property owners to choose to apply for grants that will ultimately improve downtown Pendleton and other parts of the urban renewal

area," the report states. "If they do not choose to apply, despite the incentives, then the projects won't be implemented."

The advisory committee suggests developing a marketing plan by February and begin implementing in April.

The plan could include sending mailers or holding meetings for prospective developers. The city could also solicit city-owned properties and open negotiations for further incentives.



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