

'EL DUMPSTERBOT' LIVES!

Students learn programming, building skills in new Echo robotics program

By JAYATI RAMAKRISHNAN
STAFF WRITER

It may be named "El Dumpsterbot," but the students of Echo School's robotics team hoped their machine would take them in a different direction.

A group of 22 Echo middle and high schoolers sent four teams to a qualifying event in Hillsboro on Saturday, where they competed for a spot in a state competition. Though they didn't make it to state, their teacher, Don Walker, said the students' hard work showed through.

"It was a valiant effort," he said. "We had a lot of robot troubles, probably from the long bumpy ride. Our teams ranked 21st, 27th, 28th and 32nd out of 34 teams."

Walker said the teams needed to place in the top 17 to move onto state, and that Helix was the only local team to move on.

On Thursday, students worked on some repairs and updates to their robots.

Students from the "Super

Cougars" team worked on "El Dumpsterbot," a robot designed to push a block back and forth, and lift a small garbage can.

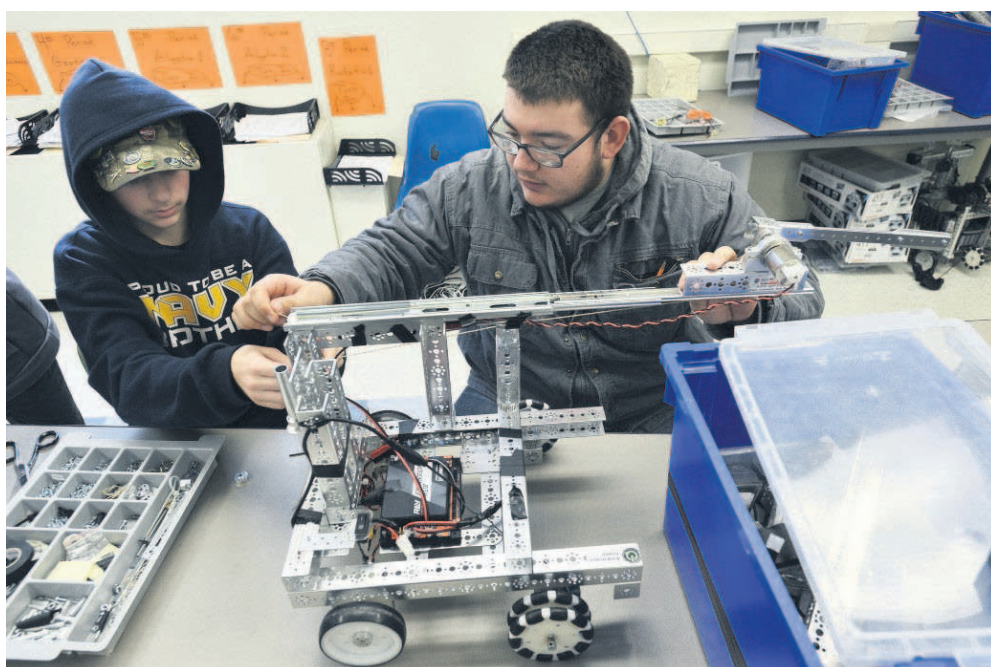
The name, however, stems from somewhere else.

"Originally we had gears, and we had to cover the gears up to make sure they weren't dangerous," said Devlyn Wilson, an eighth-grader. "So we had cardboard over it, and it was very messy."

As they work to finish up their projects and catch last-minute issues, the students recalled how much they learned in just one semester.

"I had a little experience going in, but not much," said Joe Faulkner, a ninth-grader. He was one of a few that did, as most of the students started from scratch.

"They've had no experience with programming or anything," said Don Walker, the group's advisor. "We start with going over safety, and then once we get the challenges presented to us (for the competition), we pull the information we need to pro-



Echo freshman Michael Dorn and Elijah Garcila work on a pulley system for a mechanical arm on their robot Thursday in Hermiston

STAFF PHOTO BY E.J. HARRIS

gram a robot."

Each group, comprised of five to six students, built a robot that can perform some basic function — lifting or pushing an object, and moving back and forth. As some students worked Thursday morning on physical issues, like getting the robot's arm to move, others huddled over computers, making sure the robot was programmed to do

what it's supposed to.

"One portion of our competition is autonomous mode," said Luis Ibarra, an eighth-grader. "There's a 30-second period where the robot has to move by itself, and the drivers can't touch the controls."

The students will program the robot to perform some task during that time, whether moving in a spe-

cific direction or pushing an object into a certain area.

The competition was scored based on various skills.

"It's based on what the robot can do to score points, how well the drivers can drive, and of course how we build it to make it work," said Charlei Harwood, a builder and designer.

Each team consisted of

programmers, builders and drivers, as well as someone to do outreach and record the process.

"I take pictures for the group and work on the engineering notebook," said Maddie Owen, an eighth-grader. "We have to keep track of what we're doing each day."

Walker, a math teacher at Echo School, started the program this school year when he moved to the district after seven years as a teacher in Stanfield. He still assists Stanfield with their robotics teams.

The team went to five local meets this season, competing against teams from Umatilla, Stanfield, Pendleton and Helix.

"The majority of them love it," Walker said. "Their biggest challenge is figuring out ways to think critically through problems, and figure stuff out on their own."

Ninth-grader Joe Faulkner said they had issues to smooth out before Saturday, but he was excited to put the robot into action.

"We're trying to still get the arm working," he said. "We're trying to get it to the right power level, to do what we need it to do."

Hermiston chess club teaches strategy as well as social skills

By JAYATI RAMAKRISHNAN
STAFF WRITER

A deafening silence settled over the Hermiston High School library as 20 kids stared at chess boards, plotting their next moves.

The Region 23/24 chess tournament drew elementary schoolers from Heppner, and middle and high schoolers from Hermiston — all trying to qualify for the state tournament. The tournament is March 9 and 10.

After a high-drama three-way tie for the top high school spot, all three students will move on to state. The winners were senior Gabriel Gomez and sophomores Isaac Bonifer and Jeremy Bowden. Each boy won four of the five matches they played.

At the middle and elementary school level, the top five scorers will attend the state tournament as a team. The winners for the middle school level are Luke Gray, Zane Herron, Nathan Boother, Dillon Herron and Elijah Robinson.

The elementary school



STAFF PHOTO BY JAYATI RAMAKRISHNAN

Students from the Heppner Elementary School chess team were at the Hermiston-hosted chess tournament on Saturday. Students played to qualify for the state tournament.

winners are Owen Guerra, Nicholas Wenberg, Claire Lindsay, Jaime Cavan, and John Lindsay and Maya Payne, who tied for the third-highest score.

As Hermiston High School sophomores Neveah Cubbage and Kylie Barker waited to start their final round of the day, they reflected on their games so

far. The biggest challenge, Cubbage said, is that with a fairly small group of people, they have to find new ways to beat the same opponents.

"If you play a lot of the same people, they know what your moves are, and they can figure out how to beat you," Barker said.

But both agreed that their favorite aspect has been

meeting new people. The two became friends when they joined chess club several years ago.

Club advisor Delia Fields said there are anywhere between 30 and 40 people in chess club, encompassing all three secondary schools. The team practices twice a week, and students get the chance to play opponents of varying skill levels, and get assistance from adult volunteers.

Fields said the chess club received a boost this year, when it became an official "Chess for Success" team. Joining a group of schools all over Oregon and one in Washington, the organization started in 1992 as a way to teach chess to at-risk youth, to help them develop critical thinking and problem solving skills.

"It's allowed us to go from a small, strong program to a larger strong program," Fields said. "The kids aren't hamstrung by registration fees."

A group of about 40 elementary schoolers from Heppner made the trip to Hermiston. The only elementary

school in the area with a Chess for Success program, students have found a lot they like about the game.

"I like the 'touch-move' rule," said fifth-grader Jaime Cavan, noting a rule that if a player touches a piece, they have to move that piece. "Sometimes my opponent messes up."

Claire Lindsay, a third grader, said one of the challenges has been playing chess under pressure.

"When I went to state, it was really hard," she said. "I saw that I was going to be able to get a draw, but I didn't win," she said.

For some students, chess has quickly become a favorite pastime. Though they were done competing for the day, Luke Gray and Zane Herron, sixth graders at Armand Larive Middle School, sat with a chessboard outside the library and played a practice game.

Both had won four of their five tournaments.

"I just love to play chess," Gray said.

"It's a nice, relaxing game," Herron said. "It's a

good way to free your mind and focus. I believe it makes you more self-aware."

Gray has been playing for several years, and learned from his father.

"My dad's a trucker. And when he was on the road, we would play online chess on chess.com," he said.

MaryAnn Elguezabal, the Heppner chess coach, said many of her students come in with little to no chess experience. The Chess for Success program provides lesson plans, and she relies on volunteers to help teach.

Both Elguezabal and Fields said they have seen changes in their students outside of the chess game.

"We're a safe landing place," Fields said. "They learn social skills, real thoughtful and purposeful actions."

Elguezabal said she has seen an improvement in patience and manners from many students.

"They learn that everything you do has a consequence," she said. "Once you've moved that chess piece, it's moved."

BREAK

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Linn has said at several previous meetings that the proposed schedule would be disruptive to testing for elementary school students and teachers, as well as make it difficult for teachers who have children in different districts.

"Especially at the elementary school, we feel we were devalued," he said. "The Ed Council never came back and got feedback from teachers. It's my impression that they didn't intend for things to change."

Linn said that while the district said it wanted to make a decision that was best for all students, he didn't feel that was the case with this choice.

"We feel this prioritizes high school sports kids over academics at the elementary school level," he said.

Rocky Heights teacher Shanna Evans also read a prepared statement opposing the schedule change.

Loretta Fitterer, president of the Hermiston Association of Teachers, which designates the Educational Council in its collective bargaining agreement, spoke in favor of the calendar change in her statement to the board.

"But we need to make sure we're doing best not just for high school kids. It's not just based on sports. It's based on how it impacts all kids."

Karen Sherman, board chair

School board members said while they knew the change would make some upset, they felt they could not ignore the Educational Council's recommendation.

Board member Ginny Holthus referred to a letter Linn had sent to the board, outlining his concerns.

"Regarding the comments on sports — we're making the recommendation based on the fact that they're students first," she said.

"It's difficult to set aside the time that the Ed Council spent," added board member Josh Goller.

Board chair Karen Sherman acknowledged that some would be negatively affected.

"But we need to make sure we're doing best not just for high school kids," she said. "It's not just based on sports. It's based on how it impacts all kids."

Sherman and Mooney

said that an online survey was made available to all district staff members.

Gomolski said he had heard comments from many people in the past few weeks.

"You're right," he said to the teachers present at the meeting. "It always seems like we're doing what's best for high school sports kids. At this point, I don't feel comfortable voting for it."

Linn said he was disappointed with the decision.

"A lot of community members will be negatively impacted," he said. "This is going to be an every-year issue. We'll have to try to influence the Ed Council next year."

The 2018-2019 school year is now scheduled to start Aug. 27 and end June 10. Winter break is scheduled for Dec. 24 through Jan. 4, and spring break for April 1 through 5.

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