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Students gather for robot challenge

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POCATELLO — With names like Purple People Eater, Bumble Bee and The Crab, robots designed and built by students from area high schools did battle at Pocatello High School on Wednesday.

It's called the VEX Challenge and the tournament is hosted by Pocatello High School's robotics class, said Sharie Ellis, an electronics teacher and instructor of the robotics class at Pocatello.

"It's mostly for fun," Ellis said. "It's also preparation for the big event in Portland in early March."

For the Portland, Ore., event, the class will develop a robot valued at about \$10,000. The VEX robots used in Wednesday's competition are a smaller scale, with a much smaller price tag. They are also the culmination of class projects.

Joining Pocatello's robotics class on Wednesday were similar classes from Shelley High School, Marsh Valley High School and Century High School.

"Tonight is more of a learning match," Ellis said. "Next Tuesday will be the finals."

She said Wednesday's matches are used to test the students' robotic creations and many will use the results to fine tune their robots for the finals next Tuesday.

The game is played in a triangle with sides measuring about eight feet in length. In the middle is a much smaller triangle where the competing robots must deposit ping pong balls, known as pings. Each team struggles to use their robot to scoop up their particular color ping — orange, blue or yellow — before depositing them.

The winner is the team of two robots that scores the most points by depositing pings, getting back to their corner before the three minutes expires, and to double their overall score, deposit the striped ball, known as the pong, into the inner triangle.

The pong is placed in an opposing team's corner and retrieval, not depositing it into the inner triangle, is the difficulty here.

During the first match, the Purple People Eater ruled the triangle. It's the creation of Pocatello High School sophomore Anthony Beebe, and includes a large flat scoop that gobbled up all of his orange pings and deposited them into the inner triangle in one swoop.

Anthony spent most of the three-minute match using the Purple People Eater to obstruct other robots from picking up pings or depositing them. Even with the dominance of his robot, Anthony said there is still work to be done.

"The only thing we will have a problem with is getting to the pong, or something on the robot getting stuck during the match," Anthony said. "But tonight went pretty much as we planned."



JOE KLINE/ IDAHO STATE JOURNAL Pocatello High School student Anthony Beebe, right, mans the controls to the “Purple People Eater” robot (left) as a group of other students looks on during the VEX Challenge hosted by Pocatello High School’s robotics class at the gym on Wednesday.