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Youth robotics team gets donation

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POCATELLO — Members of Haywire Robotics Team 1569 got a \$5,000 check from sponsors Wednesday to help finance construction of a robot they will enter in a competition scheduled for Feb. 28 through March 1 in Portland, Ore.

The area high school students on the team piloted their robotic creations around AMI Semiconductor's Fab 7 conference room, in a prelude to the real competition to soon come.

The team has been working continually since Jan. 5 to complete its specialized robot, named Mach 5. In this year's event, the participants must design a robot to race around a track, knocking down 40-inch balls and propelling them around the track, all the while avoiding five other robots with the same singleminded mission.

The competition specifics were not disclosed until Feb. 5. The teams receive boxes filled with components which they must fashion into a semiautonomous, 120-pound robot within six weeks.

Team co-captains Kevin Housley, of Pocatello High School, and Spencer Denton, of Century High School, estimate the team has logged more than 1,000 hours working on the robot since Jan. 5. The robot must be finished, boxed up and ready for shipping to Portland on Feb. 18.

"(I average) five hours a night working on it," Denton said. "I left school at 10 p.m. yesterday."

The \$6,000 team entry fee includes the basic components for their robots. Teams are allowed to spend an additional \$3,500 on their creations. In the end, they cannot exceed the 120-pound limit, save for the 12-volt battery which powers the unit.

More than 37,500 high school students on more than 1,500 teams from Brazil, Canada, Chile, Israel, Mexico, the Netherlands, the U.K., and every state in the U.S. are participating in this year's For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology competition, according to the event's Web site.

This is the fourth year a School District 25 team has participated in the FIRST competition. Previous teams have fared well, but have not yet advanced to the international competition in Atlanta.

FIRST was organized by inventor Dean Kamen and a committee of engineers and other professionals. Kamen is the inventor of the first insulin pump, the IBOT all-terrain electric wheelchair, and, most famously, the Segway PT, a two-wheeled, self-balancing electric scooter.

Besides local science teachers and AMI technicians, the event has drawn in less obvious robot enthusiasts. Gary Forgeon, who retired as an INL machinist in June 2006, became intrigued after hearing about the program from his girlfriend who works at Pocatello High School.

Forgeon said that when he first started attending the team's sessions, the kids were wary of his help. However, after hearing his ideas and seeing the drawings and machining shop work he produced, the students have embraced him as a team member.

Forgeon, 62, said that he goes in to help every weekday and sometimes Saturdays, working from 4 p.m. until as late as 9:30 p.m.

"I'm really enjoying it," Forgeon said. "The kids are really sharp and work together really well."

Haywire's sponsors include the Idaho National Laboratory, AMI, Bechtel, Simplot, the National Science Foundation and Idaho State University. The team is still seeking donations, which are tax deductible. Potential donors may contact Haywire Robotics at 233-2056 or bring donations directly to Marlene Becker, Room 116, Pocatello High School, 325 N. Arthur Ave.



JOHN BULGER/ IDAHO STATE JOURNAL Haywire Robotics Team members pilot one of their robot designs.