

Statesman

Westlake robotics team maneuvers way to state championship

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Keeping their record of excellence, Westlake High School robotics teams triumphed at the University Interscholastic League Robotics State Championship on July 28-30 at the Austin Convention Center.

The UIL hosts statewide competitions in many areas — from science and mathematics to journalism and music — but the competition was the organization’s historical first robotics-focused event.

UIL launched its robotics pilot program in the 2015-16 school year. It supports two divisions: for Inspiration & Recognition of Science & Technology; and Boosting Engineering, Science and Technology. Both of these are separate robotics organizations that UIL has adopted into its competition curriculum.

The First division is further split into two categories: First Robotics Competition and First Tech Challenge, each with a different focus and timetable. The championship was the culmination of both of these events in the First season. Under First, this competition had been known as Texas Robot Roundup (TRR).

“TRR’s integration with UIL has caused the event to explode from around 10 teams last year to about 70 or 80 this year,” said Westlake sophomore Joseph Asfour. “This increase added so many more facets to the tournament experience, yet the informal and ‘just-for-fun’ feel of the competition still remained.”

Asfour is a robot driver on the Westlake FTC team, The Philobots. The Philobots, Pi Rho Maniacs, Tau Manifesto and Sigma Summation were the four Westlake FTC teams to qualify for UIL.

Out of all the First Tech Challenge robotics teams in Texas, all four teams from Westlake made it to the semifinals. That’s where things started to heat up. The Sigmas ranked highly enough in the preliminaries to be alliance captains, and they chose the Pi Rhos as their partners in the competition. They defeated their schoolmates, the Philobots and Taus, in the semifinals to become the two teams representing Westlake High in the finals. They prevailed, bringing home the historic first Texas State Champion title.

“It was definitely a great experience to meet and compete against some of the best teams in the state — and have the opportunity to show off a robot that took so much time, effort and dedication to create,” said Westlake sophomore and outreach director of the Pi Rho Maniacs Saanya Bhargava. Their effort was rewarded with the first-ever UIL State Champion plaques and medals.

The other teams didn’t go home unhappy.

“TRR was just a side event for us. It was a way to see how good we were against our own Texas teams,” said Tau Manifesto programmer Parker Bergen. “I thought we would do a bit better, but we did to make it to semifinals.”

In the concurrent First Robotics Competition division, Westlake’s Team Appreciate qualified to participate. They ranked fourth in preliminaries and became alliance captains. They reached the semifinals but were defeated there by the eventual First Tech Challenge state champions.

But they came home accomplished in other meaningful ways. They received the First in Texas Leadership Award for their work promoting science, technology, engineering and mathematics and robotics in Texas. Westlake junior Brooke Cohen is a lead mechanic and robot driver on Team Appreciate.

“Robotics isn’t just building a robot and programming it,” she said. “It’s spreading STEM through our community outreach; it’s competing at tournaments; and it’s a family. Robotics teaches you how to pitch ideas, how to talk to professionals ... the value of teamwork.”

An integral part of First teams and the Robotics experience — as per the First manifesto — is the mentorship. Mentors from all walks of life in the engineering world work with the First teams to help build leadership traits in the students they support.

At the championship, mentor Linda McMahon of Team Appreciate received the Mentor of the Year award for outstanding dedication to doing just that.

Westlake High School certainly made its mark on Texas robotics history.

“We went there to have fun,” said project manager of the Sigmas and Westlake sophomore Arnhav Iyengar. “And we did.”