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ROBOTICS STUDENTS BATTLE IN PENNSYLVANIA BOTBALL TOURNAMENT

Botball Program teaches students to build both robots and an interest in technology

NORMAN, Okla. - Over 150 middle school and high school robotics students will converge in Alison Park on Saturday, March 29 for the 2008 Pennsylvania Regional Botball Robot Tournament being held at Hampton High School (2929 McCully Rd., Allison Park, PA 15101-1327). Tournament registration begins at 8 a.m. and seeding rounds will start at 10 a.m. and double elimination rounds will begin at 1:30 p.m. This event is free and open to the public.

Cathryne Stein, executive director for the KISS Institute for Practical Robotics (the company behind Botball), said the Botball Educational Robotics Program puts middle and high school students on the creative side of technology as they design, build, program, and document a pair of robots that work in sync to score points during a tournament.

“Students build the robots themselves, this way they can experience hands on learning. Also, the robots are completely autonomous meaning there is no remote control, everything is programmed prior to the game. This creates a unique challenge for the students,” Stein said.

Botball teams consist middle school and/or high school aged students who work together to design, build, and program these independent machines. After completion, teams attend regional tournaments to compete against other robotics teams through a series of predetermined tasks. Instead of trying to destroy an opponent (like Battlebots), the robots are trying to outwit and outmaneuver the opposition.

Stein said that each year students compete in a new game with a different theme and different tasks. These specifications are considered highly confidential and are released to teams simultaneously.

“The theme this year is Space Station KIPR .08. Teams are told that a solar flare is heading towards their fictional Space Station, or game board. Each team’s robots have only two minutes to prepare before a dangerous wave of alpha particles reaches the station. Robots are must move various objects to new locations on and off the game board to ensure their safety,” Stein said.

According to 2008 season rules, teams are allotted points for each successful movement and for unsuccessful movements points are deducted or not awarded. The robots’ success or failure depends entirely on the students’ programming prior to the game. No remote controls or joysticks are used. When a round starts, the students place the bots in the starting box and step away from the table.

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Aside from the annual change to the game design, this year the tournament will have several other changes.

“This year the Botball game board has doubled in size and participants will be using a new robotic element from iRobot called the Create,” said Jenny Grigsby, public outreach coordinator for KISS Institute. “A Create is basically a Roomba Vacuum Cleaning Robot but it doesn’t have the actual vacuum. Students like it because it is a sturdy base that they can start building on and programming right when they get their equipment.”

The Botball Educational Robotics Program is based in Norman, Okla. however, the program culminates in regional tournaments across the country including Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Greater St. Louis, Hawaii, Midwest, New England, New York, New Jersey, California, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Texas, and Washington, DC.

Over 6,000 students participate in Botball every year and more than 40,000 have competed over the course of 11 years. In 2008, teams from 22 states and six countries will participate in Botball.

For more information on this tournament or the Botball Educational Robotics Program, please visit www.botball.org or call at (405) 579-4609.

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The Pennsylvania Regional Botball Program is sponsored in part by: NASA Robotics Alliance Project, Solidworks Corporation, Innovation First, Incorporated, Robotevents.com, iRobot, and the X PRIZE Foundation