

# FIRST Robotics Competition trains students in science, job skills

*Building robots helps students build their futures, too*

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The Ninjineers quickly rolled their robot from the ring to the pit Friday morning, relieved that the first match of the day didn't leave any wounds in need of repair. The teens then began discussing and testing strategies.

Before a panel of judges, high school teams like the Exploding Bacon from Winter Park, Knight and Nerdy from Clermont and Plantation's Ninjineers showcased their made-from-scratch robots in a wrestling-like cage, maneuvering their creations around the ring and making them climb pyramid structures and shoot Frisbees into slots high in the air.

It was all part of the FIRST Robotics Competition South Florida regional, which ends Saturday when judges decide which five out of 46 teams move on to the world championship in Missouri in April.

Though science and technology were on full display at the competition, "it's not just about robots," said Sandra Contreras, South Florida regional director for FIRST, an acronym meaning For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology.

"All the kids here can and will become professionals," Contreras said. "They're also building on experiences at management level, making marketing plans, creating team spirit, developing values so needed now in industries."

Aside from mechanics, Plantation's American Heritage School's Ninjineers had a marketing and communications department tasked with fundraising and attracting sponsors like JCPenney and Motorola, said 16-year-old Juan Diego Flores, a Ninjineer mechanic and student ambassador at the event. It cost about \$4,500 to build their robot, he said. They also had project leaders, a spirit team known for its dancing, programming and electrical teams, among other key players, Flores said. "It's a lot like running a business," he added.

Massimo Salafia, the "mentor of young minds," said the training students got from participating in the robotics team was "a big step" toward professional jobs.

"They don't realize how good they are until they go into the real world," Salafia said. "My goal is to face them with a problem, have them learn from the problem and find solutions, one step at a time."

FIRST, regionally sponsored by NASA and Florida Power & Light, is regarded as the "super bowl of the mind," challenging participants to build robots in six weeks from a standard kit of parts, without instructions. More than 2,500 teams participate worldwide.

This is the second year a regional competition is held in South Florida. Teams from all across the country, Mexico and the Dominican Republic attended this year's three-day event at the Greater Fort Lauderdale/Broward County Convention Center.

Jim Keener, an FPL executive, said he was fascinated by the enthusiasm and innovation of students.

"If they continue this way, I'd be willing to give everyone a job," Keener said. "I think this concept, this competitive environment, builds our future engineers and scientists."

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IF YOU GO:

Want to check out the robotic action? The event is free and open to the public.

Where: Greater Fort Lauderdale/Broward County Convention Center, 1950 Eisenhower Blvd., Fort Lauderdale

Saturday's schedule:

8 a.m.: Pits and machine shop open

9 a.m. to 9:30 a.m.: Opening ceremonies

9:30 a.m. to 12:15 p.m.: Qualification matches

12:15 p.m. to 12:30 p.m.: Alliance selections

12:30 p.m. to 1:30 p.m.: Lunch

1:30 p.m. to 4:30 p.m.: Final rounds

4:45 p.m. to 5:30 p.m.: Awards ceremony

6:30 p.m.: Pits close; Crates packed

\*Schedule subject to change.

Source: FIRST Robotics Competition

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