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Tech High team headed for 'Super Bowl' of robotics

By Nicolas Grizzle



Tech High's "Gloria Machina," No. 675, in action at the FIRST robotics competition at UC Davis last weekend. The Tech High Phantoms finished in the top 8 and received the Regional Engineering Inspiration Award, which earned them a trip to the national finals April 12-14 in Atlanta.

Thanks to their strong performance at the regional competition at UC Davis last weekend, the Tech High robotics team is headed to the Super Bowl of robotics competitions, the FIRST (For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology) National Robotics Competition at the Georgia Dome in Atlanta, Georgia April 12-14.

"This is as big as it gets," said an enthusiastic Laurie Erwin, substitute teacher at Tech High.

The team was invited to the finals after winning the Regional Engineering Inspiration Award at the regional competition at UC Davis. The award is the second-highest award given at the competitions, the only higher award being the Chairman's Award. These two awards and Rookie of the Year honors earn a trip to the national competition with the top three finishers at the competition.

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TECH HIGH ROBOTICS

The Phantoms will be competing in the Georgia Dome against 314 other teams in front of about 30,000 spectators, a significant jump from the 39 teams at UC Davis.

Elizabeth Conley and Ford Harris, two of the 11 club members leaving for Atlanta Wednesday, said they did not expect to win this award. They were hoping for the safety award, which does not earn a trip to the finals.

Conley is a big part of the fundraising for the team. Thanks in part to her efforts, MV Transportation is providing the team with \$10,000 to help offset the cost of travel.

Conley also helps with last-minute checks on the robot, named "Gloria Machina," which translates from Latin roughly to "glory to the machine." Harris was one of the lead manufacturers and also helps in the pits to fix up the robot between rounds.

The team finished in the top eight in Davis last weekend, its best finish ever. Harris attributes this to more sponsors and mentors available to the club this year.

Neither Conley nor Harris have been to Atlanta, and both are excited to go. Harris is especially excited to compete "where the Falcons play."

To quote FIRST's Web site about the Engineering Inspiration Award: "This award celebrates a team's outstanding success in advancing respect and appreciation for engineering and engineers, both within their school as well as their community."

The robot is designed to pick up small, round inflatables, like small inner tubes, and hang them. It also performs well in the bonus round, where lifting other robots off the ground (teammates or opponents) earns more points. "Gloria Machina" folds out to a platform for other robots to roll onto.

The competition is announced in January, and teams have six weeks to design, build and test their robot. The competition rules are a surprise to the teams each year.

With only three seniors, most of the club's 40 students will return next year. The team finished in the 30s out of 48 teams at a San Jose regional competition two weeks ago, but did much better at the Davis competition, which was more intense, according to Harris.

Club Advisor Greg Weaver and Principal Kay Dorner were unavailable for comment before deadline. A pasta feed fundraiser for the robotics club is coming up April 27 at Rancho Cotate High School's multi-use room. Call the school at 792-4825 for more information.