Ingenuity shines at robotics challenge

By Tara Bowie, Woodstock Sentinel-Review

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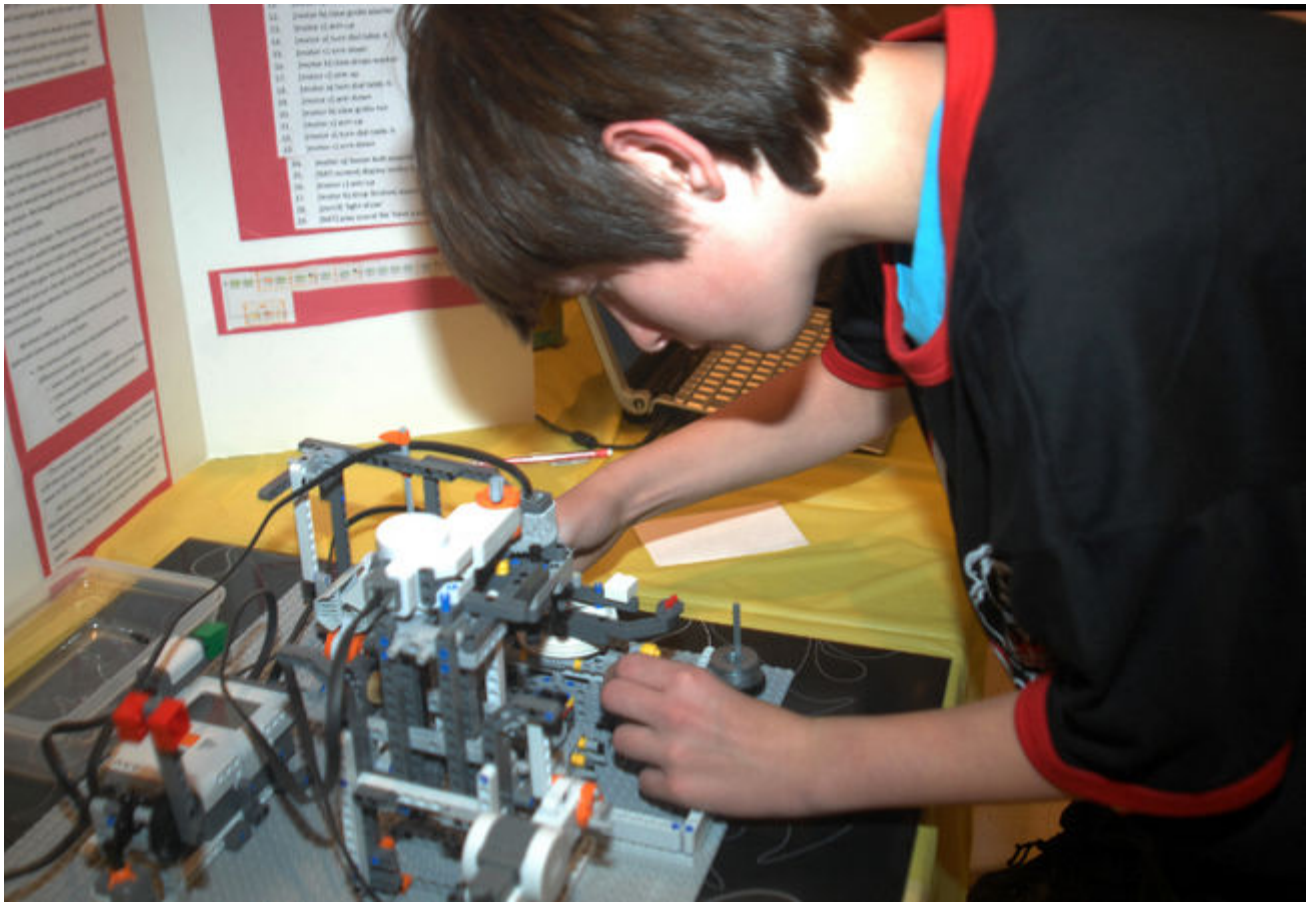

WOODSTOCK - At the all-important moment, the Plattsville Troll Bots Lego robot choked.

“It was working (but) then the judges came and it wasn’t working. Then they left and it’s working again,” Grade 8 Plattsville Elementary School student Austin Zalac said during the Oxford Invitation Youth Robotics Challenge at Goff Hall Tuesday.

Zalac, along with his teammates, made up the youngest team to compete this year in what is typically a high school team competition.

It took two months of lunch hours – and Saturday afternoons – for the team to build a robot that incorporated colour sensors, gears and mechanics to fasten a nut and washer on a bolt.

The team had the robot working perfectly before the competition, but through troubleshooting, determined it was the inconsistency of materials that stopped it from performing.

“There are grooves on the top of this bolt, see,” said Zalac. “The grooves don’t fit into this piece right and it’s messing with the timing.”

The Plattsville Troll Bots were not the only team having a difficult time with the hardest challenge thrown at students in the competition’s six-year history.

A team from Rehoboth Christian School in Norwich was tweaking their robot as judges circled Goff Hall.

The team, called Fastenater, only had three weeks to design and assemble their robot. They decided to use gravity to move the washer and the bolts into place, but unfortunately gravity ended up working against them.

“The washers are piling up on one another,” said Egbert Aarnoudse, a Grade 10 student.

They hadn’t had a clean run all day.

All glitches aside, the event was still deemed a success by co-chair Ian Heikoop.

The idea behind the competition is to expose students to high-skilled, high-paid careers that are currently in demand while providing experiences with team building and problem solving.

Each team was paired with an industry expert to design and assemble the robot.

“It builds bridges between local schools and businesses,” Heikook said. “It is a chance for them to try out their skills and gives businesses an opportunity to connect with the best technical talent in the area.”

Several students over the years have went on to study robotics in post-secondary education or secured jobs with companies they worked with.

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