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Getting KIDS' GEARS

Clubs, camps and competitions offer a taste of robotics on LI

BY ELLEN YAN

Special to Newsday

Boys shout and cheer over the carnage on the battlefield: bits of red tank tread, a claw-like pincer, spinning arms, tiny beads, tires and even pingpong-like balls.

At the X-Robotx storefront in Seaford, robot wars are a tabletop exercise on building and coding robot creations out of Legos and imagination, then using remote controls to direct them. One student tells his robot to repeatedly slam its spade-like front-end weapon on his opponent's robot. Another student bemoans the fact that his machine could go in only one direction. Alas, two robots get stuck together when extensions meant to flip the enemy tangle in the enemy's wires.

"It was probably the funnest fight I've ever had," Harrison Rainey, 10, a Seaford fifth grader, proclaims after losing a battle.

Robotics has been emerging in schools and communities as a prime setting not just for fun but for analytical thinking and social growth, enthusiasts and teachers say. Like sports leagues, school and private robotics teams compete around the region and nation, with students winning scholarships and making friends, according to competition websites and robotics teachers.

Across Long Island, clubs, camps and competitions offer a taste of robotics and coding.

Snapology

1500 Old Country Rd., Westbury

Girls in Brownie uniforms choose plastic pieces from a kit to fashion something greater than the sum of its parts: a robot that picks things up.

"I'm going to be a scientist when I grow up," says Harper Gregory, 7, of East Meadow, "and I want to make a robot that can build whatever you want."

About a dozen members of



Members of Girl Scouts Brownie Troop 1083 from East Meadow race their robots at a workshop at Snapology in Westbury.

the Girl Scouts Brownie Troop 1083 from East Meadow are working on earning their robotics badge at Snapology, the Westbury franchise of a national business that teaches STEM and robotics.

Populating the robotics field with more women has been a passion for franchise owner Nancy Setzler, 59, who sees her field still dominated by men after 25 years as a programmer. Her main base is her storefront at Samanea New York, where she teaches boys and girls how to break major problems into smaller, solvable bits.

"If women are underestimated, only problems that men face will be solved," says Setzler, of Seaford. "Adding diver-

sity to the STEM-related workforce will help find solutions to a broader array of issues."

COST Starting at \$20

MORE INFO 516-785-0080, snapology.com/new-york-nassau-county

Sachem Robotics Team

Sachem schools

Every year, as many as 100 Sachem high school students and several technology teachers compete in global robotics contests organized by For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology (FIRST), a New Hampshire-based non-

profit that promotes robotics in schools and career paths.

But it's a different type of competition; good humans help each others' robots. If one team's robot breaks down, another team can help diagnose the problem. If one team needs a part, another team will often give it up.

"It's all about give and take," says James Byrne, a technology teacher at Sachem East High School, among the four teachers and four experts guiding the team. "FIRST is very big about their slogans, 'coopertition' and gracious professionalism. . . ."

This is the sport of the mind."

FIRST has scores of Long Island school robotics teams entering their annual competitions. This year, the mission is Reefscape, creating a coral reef with robots putting plastic tubes (imagined coral) into prongs on a massive, pretend sea bottom.

The Sachem team, called Aftershock, shows off its new robot each year to schools and the community, garnering mentors and business sponsors along the way.

Team captain Enzo Evola, 18, a senior at Sachem East High School, says the club has a place for students who don't have robotics skills. Some students share updates on social media, others create graphics to go on

ON THE COVER Harrison Agostini, 9, left, of Massapequa Park, and Myles Perry, 10, of Massapequa, at X-Robotx in Seaford.

turning



NEWSDAY / STEVE PROST

Sachem robotics team captain Enzo Evola, left, demonstrates a robot for Mike Scott and son Joe, of Holbrook, at Sachem North High School on Friday.

the robot, those with “warehouse” skills organize storage of supplies. “My favorite thing is just being able to hang out with like-minded people, share ideas and make friends,” the Holtsville resident says.

MORE INFO Students in districts without a FIRST robotics club might be able to join a FIRST team in a neighboring school district, first263.org

Hofstra University

101 Oak St., Uniondale

A bolt is not just a bolt at the university’s summer robotics camp.

“They’re learning about the tools and how they work,” says Stefanie Gillman, director of Hofstra Summer Camps. “What could you do out of this that would be a unique tool? What would be some other ways that you could use this?” Hofstra partners with the Game Builders Academy in New Hyde Park to run the camp, she says. The academy starts the learning from the ground up, getting students familiar with even the smallest bits of hardware that make a robot. Among its tools, the camp uses Lego Mindstorms to build robots. Some look like dogs, others like moon rovers and one like a drummer playing the drums.

Gillman notes robotics as one of Hofstra’s most diverse summer camps, drawing students from various backgrounds. “I think young people understand that this is cutting edge,” the director says. “In our particular program, not only are they learning interesting skills and curious tools, but they’re having fun with it.”

COST \$2,300

MORE INFO 516-463-2267, hofstra.edu

X-Robotx

1085 Hicksville Rd., Seaford

Company president Peter Xanthus wants to bring the massive popularity of robotics in New York City schools to Long Island. Every student at MS-216 in Fresh Meadows, where he teaches STEM and robotics, must take a robotics class, a sign of the administration’s support, says Xanthus. His school clubs have won three New York City robotics championships, he says.

For now, his Seaford storefront is home to after-school classes for kids, and like many robotics teachers, Xanthus believes these lessons teach life skills.

“So many kids on my robotics teams who can’t lose or fail, cry,” the teacher notes. “You’re going to get it wrong, you’re going to get teary-eyed and you’re going to keep going and get solutions.”

In the recent robot wars at his storefront, both winners and losers dissected any problems they had after a battle and immediately went to bins of Legos and other parts to improve their robots.

Massapequa fifth grader Myles Perry knows his problem: wheels. “They are easy to get under,” the 10-year-old concludes. “They are easy to flip.”

Xanthus describes it as “the smartest fun.”

COST \$225 and up

MORE INFO 516-313-7389, x-robotx.com

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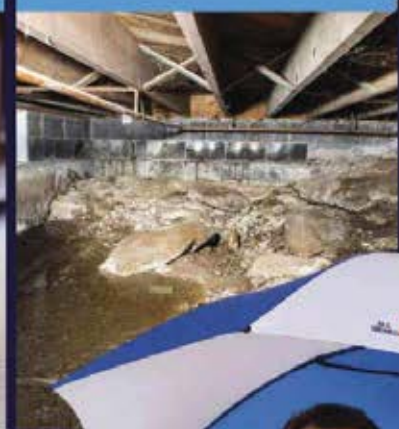
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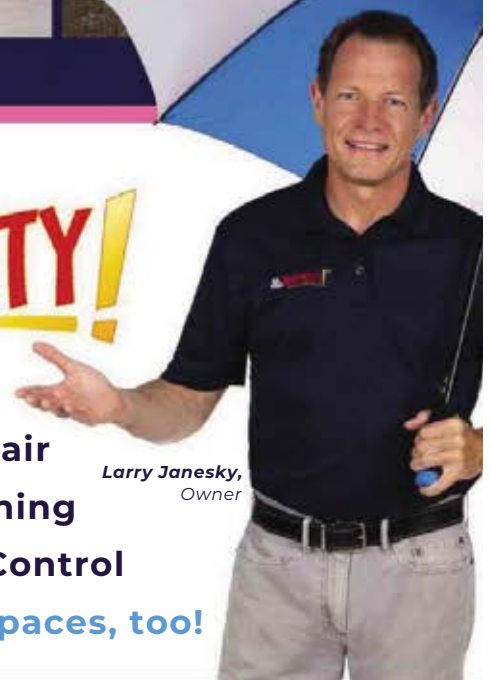
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