

Going toe to toe, but with robots

BY ROBERT BRODSKY

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Throgs of spectators screamed as handmade, Frisbee-spitting red and blue robots clashed in a roped-off arena.

As the teens who built the rolling machines wielded remote controls, some in the crowd waved signs and proudly wore their team T-shirts. A few others took it up a notch, sporting matching red mohawks.

Welcome to the 14th annual Long Island Regional FIRST Robotics Competition, where high schoolers aspiring to become engineers and computer programmers are greeted with an enthusiasm often reserved for professional athletes.

Forty-nine teams from Long Island and New York City — plus one from Brazil — participated in the three-day competition, which wrapped up yesterday at Hofstra University.

Guided by mentors, the teams had six weeks to design and build their robots before testing their skills in competition. The robots score points by shooting Frisbees into nets and climbing pyramids.

"It's just fun to come in every day and think, 'I need to

build this part,'" said Nicholas Panzarino, 17, a senior at Westhampton Beach High School, who spent eight hours a day on his robot.

This year, FIRST Robotics — "For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology" — features 2,546 teams competing in regional competitions. Winners are invited to the national finals April 24-27 in St. Louis, with university scholarships at stake.

The Long Island program, however, isn't cheap. Students pay up to \$6,500 in registration fees, and it costs School-Business Partnerships of Long Island, a Kings Parks-based nonprofit, \$250,000 to sponsor the event.

The program is running on fumes after the state withdrew \$150,000 in annual funding, said School-Business Partnerships board member Scott Schuler. "There are questions about whether it can survive in its current form," he said.

But for students who have been involved in the program since grade school building LEGO robots, FIRST is more than a competition — it's an opportunity to develop skills that could power their careers.

"I don't like sitting in class and talking about concepts,"



PHOTO BY JOHNNY WILANO

The Double X team, of The Brearley School and The Chapin School, prepare their robot before the next round.

said Chelsea Silberglid, president of the Plainview-Old Bethpage John F. Kennedy High School team. "I want to see concepts come to life."

TOP ROBOTS

Regional robotics competition winners:

- **Top team** Hauppauge High School, Queens Vocational and Technical High School, Westhampton Beach High School
- **Chairman's Award** Hauppauge High
- **Rookie All-Star Award** Seaford High School
- **Engineering Inspiration Award** Plainview-Old Bethpage High School

The winners are eligible to compete in the championship April 24-27 in St. Louis.

NOW ONLINE Watch a video report from the robotics competition. newsday.com/li