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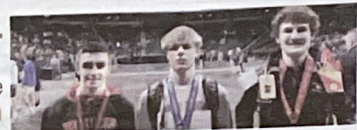
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## ROBOT RUMBLE

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# Tonkabots team advances to world competition

BY LORRIE HAM  
FOR LAKER PIONEER

The Mound Westonka Tonkabots FIRST Robotics Team earned a first-place finish at the Northern Lights Regional Competition in Duluth last week, earning a trip to the world competition in Houston, Texas in April.

The Tonkabots have never made it as far as the playoffs, until this year. With 55 teams competing in Duluth, the 41-member Tonkabots fought their way up the ranks. Together with their alliance of two other teams, they went on to not only win the regional championship, but also claim the "Double DECCer" championship, a head-to-head match with the highly decorated winning alliance of the neighboring Lake Superior Regional Championship.

The team also took home the coveted "Best Autonomous Code"



The Tonkabots FIRST Robotics Team will compete in Houston, Texas, in April as part of the league's world competition. (Submitted photo)

award, scored the most overall points in the district, recorded seven top scores in different categories, and achieved both the highest and second highest scores of the competition, the only triple digit scores of the tournament.

Working within 153 pag-

es of strict rules, teams are tasked with the challenge of designing, building, and programming a robot to perform a series of difficult tasks in a packed, high-energy arena alongside their alliance partners against other teams. Students experience real world engineering challenges and the pressure of tight deadlines, having only eight weeks of nights and weekends to accomplish their goal.

What the team learned from previous years is that they needed to stick with the design plan from CAD and not try to change things after it was created, according to advisor

Dale Kimball. This year's design was created based off previous years' trials and errors. The team had to believe in their design from the beginning and know that they did the proper due diligence to have the best robot.

"This year we came out with a very competitive robot and the team knew how to use it to its fullest potential," said Kimball. "This allowed the Tonkabots to be the highest scoring team in most of the events."

Every year a handful of MWSHS robotics alumni pay a visit to the team throughout the season as well as the Northern

Lights Regional competition. This year, however, Tonkabots alumni and 2023 MWSHS graduate Ashton Demmer took it even a step farther, coming back to serve as a coach to this year's team while juggling his college workload as a computer science major at the University of Minnesota, determined to see his alma mater earn the coveted blue banner.

"The school and many volunteers have been putting lots of work into developing the robotics program at MWSHS," Demmer says, "I wanted to continue guiding the success of the program after graduation!"

While it's easy to get overlooked amongst the thousands of participating FIRST Robotics teams across more than 30 countries worldwide, going from underdog to top dog in the regional competition has made Tonkabots a hot topic among the FIRST community, creating quite a buzz on popular online robotics forums and social platforms.

"Tonkabots would not be where we are today if it was not for all the support from the parents and team mentors that guided and provided support to the team," said Kimball.

To fund this exciting, yet unexpected oppor-

tunity to compete in the world championships, the Tonkabots are seeking individual donors and sponsors to become a part of their underdog story. The team plans to travel to Houston, Texas April 17-20, where last year 50,000 people from 50 countries gathered for the event. Businesses and individuals are invited to contribute to the Tonkabots' continued success by providing financial support to help cover competition fees, robot improvements, and team travel expenses. A GoFundMe page has been set up to accept donations on the team's behalf.

The FIRST Robotics Competition combines the excitement of sport with the rigors of science and technology. The competition inspires innovation and leadership by teaching STEM, teamwork, and problem-solving skills through engaging, hands-on robotics challenges. Teams of 10 or more students are challenged to design a team "brand," hone teamwork skills, and build and program a 120-pound robot to perform prescribed tasks against a field of competitors. To learn more about FIRST Robotics, visit their website.

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