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STATE CHAMPION

Rowe earns second straight state title

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ROBOT RUMBLE

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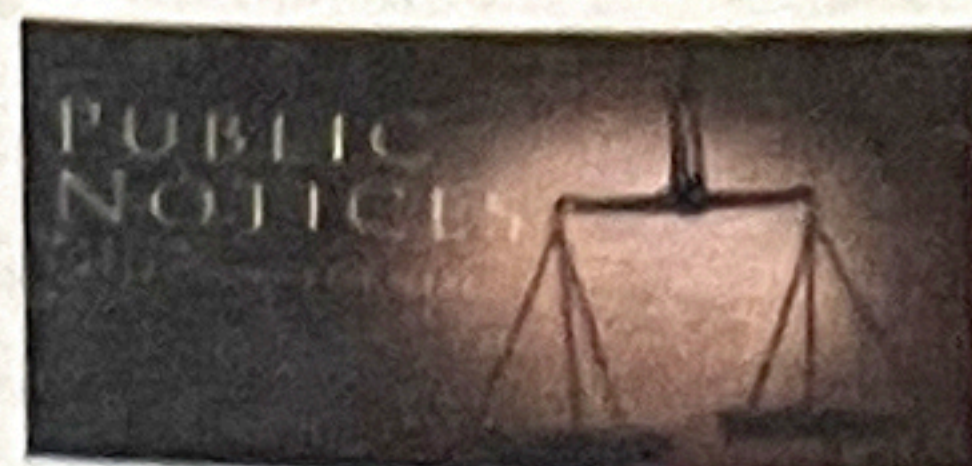
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The Westonka High School robotics team, the Tonkabots, have earned a slot in the world championships. Pictured are scenes from the recent season. (Submitted photos)

Tonkabots team advances to world championships

BY GRETCHEN FLEENER
FOR LAKER PIONEER

The Mound Westonka High School robotics team #6147 the Tonkabots have done it again this season, earning yet another championship title from their regional competition in Duluth, proving that last year's "Cinderella story" was no stroke of luck.

Last weekend 108 teams across 7 states as far away as Florida gathered in Duluth, split amongst two FIRST Robotics regional competitions held under one DECC Arena roof, making it the largest regional competition held in the country.

The Mound Westonka Tonkabots fought their way up the ranks among 54 teams in the Lake Superior Regionals, where their teamwork, skills and engineering carried them into 5th place by the final qualification rounds, earning them a place in the finals. Going into alliance selection as #5 alliance captains, the Tonkabots were the first pick of alliance #2, competing in the final rounds along with team 2847 "Megahertz" from Fairmont, MN and team 6574 "Ferradermis" from Whitewater, WI. Together the three

would take home not only the coveted regional champions' blue banner and trophy, but also go on to win the "Double DECCer Championship," a head to head, single-match competition between the winners of the Northern Lights Regional, and a slot in the World Championships this April.

Joining together with teams they had just previously competed against seems counterintuitive for a sport, but that's just one of the many things that makes FIRST Robotics unique. "Cooperation" and "Gracious Professionalism" are the terms coined by the organization as teams are encouraged and even required to work together with one another throughout the competition. One doesn't have to spend much time wandering through the "pits" at a competition before spotting one team helping another troubleshoot their wiring issue, sharing parts, helping debug code or congratulating their competition.

FIRST Robotics blends the high-energy excitement and spectacle of a sporting event with real-world engineering challenges. Working under the intense

pressure of tight deadlines, the team had only 8 weeks of nights and weekends to build a robot that would accomplish the goals revealed globally on January 4th "kickoff day," all the while carefully considering the 164 page game manual of rules and specifications. Last weekend marked "week one" of 6 weeks of regional competitions that will be held between now and the World Championship.

With the help of their advisor and engineering teacher Dale Kimball and Tonkabots alumni & coach Ashton Demmer, 47 Westonka High School 8-12 graders work alongside a group of dedicated adult volunteer parents, mentors and sponsors who support them along the way. The team has grown in size following last year's success. "There has been increased interest in joining robotics," coach Kimball says, "even with 11 seniors graduating last year. The Tonkabots are a very young team right now with only 4 seniors on the team."

This year's ocean themed challenge requires robots to pick up large rubber balls called "algae" and sections of PVC pipe called

"coral," scoring them in various elements of the playing field from ground level to 8 feet up in the air. The first 15 seconds of the match are entirely autonomous, meaning the robot performs tasks completely on its own using code written by the students. When the buzzer sounds, students step forward, grab their controls and speed through the course, attempting to capture as many points as possible in the remaining 2 minutes and 15 seconds of the match. In the final seconds, robots are challenged with climbing a "cage," lifting their 130 pound robot off of the floor. "This year's build was so much more challenging," Kimball explains. "The students have definitely put in the hours to produce the best possible robot. Scouting the other teams had a huge impact on our success this year also."

Over the next 6 weeks between now and the World Championship, this year for the first time ever the team will be competing in a second regional event, the North Star Regional at the University of Minnesota April 2-5. When not competing, Kimball says the team will be working on improving their

autonomous play. "[We] hope to go from scoring 2 game pieces to 4 in the first 15 seconds." The team will also be working on improving their ability to intake and manipulate coral and algae with a goal of creating a more well rounded robot.

The Tonkabots team would like to extend their heartfelt gratitude to all of the local businesses who have stepped up in support of their team so far this season, and are still greatly in need of new sponsors to come along for the ride and become a part of their story as they represent Mound, Minnesota on a global stage this spring at the World Championship in Houston. "Bus and lodging are very expensive," Kimball explains, "and the Tonkabots are a self funded program." The team plans to travel to Houston April 16-19, joining 50,000 people from 50+ countries who gather for the largest robotics competition in the world.

If you or your company would like to make a financial contribution to the Tonkabots' continued success and the future of these incredibly hard working kids, visit www.tonkabots.com/sponsor

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