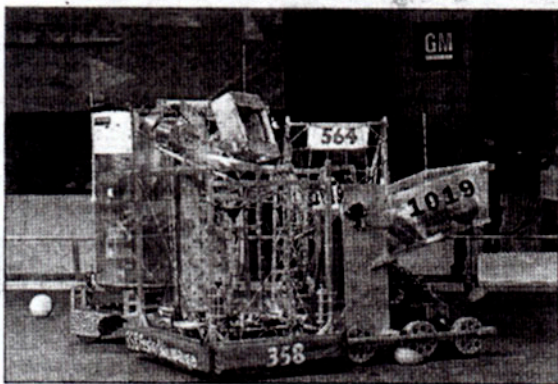


Mastering their machines



NEWSDAY PHOTOS / GEORGE TSOUROVAKAS

Above, Island Trees High's Robodawgs celebrate a win. Left, robots clash during the competition. Below, programmer Adrian Ciuperca works on a robot for Elmhurst's Newtown High.



■ Teams from across Long Island match homemade robots against each other in raucous contest

BY STACEY ALTHERR
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The crowd in the Hofstra Arena was pumped. Some had painted their faces in team colors. Others wore mascot suits, and still others brought school flags and banners. All were on their feet, stomping and chanting their team's cheer.

In that deafening noise, the final rounds of the FIRST Robotics Competition took place among 39 contenders — most of them groups from Long Island high schools, some teams more than 40 students strong. Their homemade robots were assembled in six weeks, and this was the day for which they had been waiting.

To the battle cry "Charge!" five robots rumbled across the floor. Some moving with lightning speed; some played a robot version of bumper cars. The object: to shoot foam balls into hoops and then push them into lower nets, in a timed match.

The robot's drivers stood behind Plexiglas partitions and used devices similar to Xbox game controls to drive their team's creations.

When Southold's robot was knocked on its side — and knocked out of the match — the crowd howled in disbelief. The other robots fought for position, crashing into one another while going up a ramp, their final task.

The Hauppauge Eagles were considered by many the dynas-

ty team after winning the prestigious Chairman's Award last year. Before their robot entered the fray, the team worked furiously in their "pit," an area each group was given to work out last-minute glitches.

"We're in first place, but we still have stuff breaking," Hauppauge mentor and Northrop Grumman engineer Mark McCloud said with a grin.

Later, in a tactical move, Hauppauge made an alliance with Bay Shore, and the two teams worked together to shoot balls into the air.

The "Bad Boys from Bay Shore" considered themselves lucky to be aligned with the Eagles, said Christian Morck, 17, a senior at Bay Shore.

"Instead of fighting them, we get to work with them," he said. "Last year, they beat us."

Uniondale's team, the Robotic Knights, were in the bottom half of the event by midafternoon but kept high hopes. Besides, said sophomore Tshekedi Noel, it's all about being there.

"It's exciting," he said. "It's worth it all the work we put in."

Newtown High School's Technotics, from Elmhurst, used the lunch break for a practice run. They were in an enviable seventh place before final matches.

"We're doing better [this year] because we believe in our team," said Ankit Bansal, 17.

FIRST, an acronym for For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology, was created by Dean Kamen, an inventor and engineer, who wanted a competition with the excitement of a sporting event that showcased engineering talent.

The top-ranked players will meet in Atlanta next month for the national competition.