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| *Township Journal 12/22/11* |

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| http://www.strausnews.com/content/articles/2011/12/22/township_journal/news/20.jpg |
| **The Techno Tomatoes anxiously await the ruling from the judges.** |

NEWTON — Crowds cheered as children ages nine through fourteen ran robots around a playing field in an effort to complete as many missions as they could in two minutes and thirty seconds. The winner? Halsted Middle School in Newton.  
  
Nine years ago, First Lego League (FLL) arrived in Sussex County with the county’s first robotics competition at Pope John High School. This year, Lafayette Middle School hosted the event. There were 12 teams ready to compete for one of five spots available at the New Jersey State level. According to FLL’s official website, teams are "required to program an autonomous robot using LEGO's Mindstorms robot set to score points on a thematic playing surface, create an innovative solution to a problem as part of their project, all while guided by the FLL Core Values."

The competition was structured around the 2011 FLL challenge called “Food Factor: Keeping Food Safe.”  
  
The end of Sussex County’s First Lego League robotics season saw four local teams try out their robots and research at Mount Olive High School for the FLL State Competition. Teams from Halsted Middle School, Sparta Middle School, Long Pond School and a team of home schooled children in Andover ventured on Dec. 10 to compete with 47 other teams from around New Jersey. If any of the four teams had succeeded, they would have moved on to the national competition in St. Louis. All four teams went through three judged interviews. Teams are judged for their mechanical design, strategy and innovation, and programming. They are judged for the themed project based on research, innovative solutions and presentation. Lastly, they are judged on FLL Core Values- teamwork, inspiration and “gracious professionalism.”

Success is not to be measured in trophies, according to Jim Hofmann, teacher at Halsted Middle School and coach for their Techno Tomatoes. “It’s about the teamwork. They have to learn to work with each other.”  
  
The ten middle school-aged children on the Halsted team this year had to decide on not just a robot design, but on what fruit or vegetable to research, what missions on the playing field to complete, and how to program the robot.  
  
The main focus for Hofmann was teaching these students how to work together and the Techno Tomatoes did just that. After almost four months of meeting twice a week, the Tomatoes scored a trophy, the top spot and a new record this year, with 124 points, for the Sussex County FLL teams.

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| They managed to improve their score to 128 at the Mount Olive competition, but didn’t rank high enough to earn them a spot at the National competition. They will get to try again next fall, when the FLL season begins again. |