

# Newton Robotics hosts FIRST Lego League Qualifiers event

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*Long Pond School Team "Tech Fire" setting up their robot to play the game PHOTOS BY LIAM OAKES*

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SPARTA-- On Nov. 19, thirteen middle school teams competed in the FIRST Lego League Qualifiers Event, which was hosted by the Newton Robotics Team at Sparta Middle School.

This was the first year that the team hosted this competition, as it was previously held at Lafayette Middle

School for four years. Jim Hofmann, teacher of technology education at Halsted Middle School, decided to take on the challenge of running a competition, while also maintaining a FIRST Lego League team of his own. Hofmann has been involved in the FIRST Robotics program for seven years, coaching both a high school and middle school team.

"I felt like what our Governor must feel like at times," said Hofmann, who was also assisted by Darleen Nelson along the way.

"It was a huge event to prepare for. There were many hours of logistics, planning, securing volunteers, and reminding volunteers. Organizing, conducting, orchestrating, and making it happen are what makes our team such a successful program.

"I learned at a very young age that hard work pays off in the end," Hofmann continued. "This event was inspired by our students who always come through in the end to perform. They made our day truly memorable for other students."

FIRST Lego League is a robotics competition where students in grades 4-8 design, build, and program robots out of Legos to complete different missions on custom game boards using Lego Mindstorms, Lego NXT, and Lego EV3 technology. Teams are allotted two and a half minutes to complete as many missions as possible on a 4' x 8' table, also known as the game field. Currently, there are over 23,700 teams that are registered across the globe.

Team are not only judged on their robot's design and performance-- students on teams are also evaluated on Core Values, which include teamwork, coopetition, and Gracious Professionalism, "a way of doing things that encourages high-quality work, emphasizes the value of others, and respects individuals and the community," according to FIRST.

A group of judges was led by Deborah Willemsen, while the referees of the game were headed by Ed Flynn. Deborah is a math teacher at Long Pond School in Andover, and was also the former coach of her school's FIRST Lego League Team. Ed is a manager at the Bridgewater Home Depot and also mentors his local Boy Scout troop.

"I was very impressed by what the students presented to us," said Marianne Whitaker, who judged students on Core Values.

In fact, judges, referees, and other assistants at the event are not paid for their efforts; all contributors are volunteers. The eight referees at the competition, and other competition assistants and liaisons, were students from Newton High School's robotics team, known as Aperture.

"I volunteer because I like to see the growth in students and how much they have learned," said Whitaker. Whitaker is also a teacher and a former FIRST Lego League coach at Long Pond School.

Aiden Ward, a seventh grader from Long Pond School, expressed that he "had a lot of fun."

"I felt like it was a good learning experience and I learned how to research, put together presentations, work together, and most importantly, to think outside of the box."

Ward also said he intends to continue his career in FIRST Robotics and hopes to be involved with the high school programs that the organization provides, such as the FIRST Tech Challenge and the FIRST Robotics Competition.

Team Aperture also hosted a community service project competition at the event. Participating teams brought in sums of canned goods, food, and other essential items. A total of 1,583 items were donated, with Team #4103 "The Fierce Felines" from Halsted Middle School donating 676 items, winning the

competition. The food items were donated to the Manna House food pantry in Newton, while the rest were donated to Father John's Animal House in Sparta.

There were several awards distributed at the event. The Project Award was given to Team #4103 "Fierce Felines" from Newton, Robot Design Award to Team #16610 "Nanogurus" from Morris Plains, Robot Performance Award and the Champion's Award to Team #25320 "3ngineers" from Livingston, and the Core Values Award to Team #13788 "Tech Fire" from Andover.

The 3ngineers scored across the board with over 121 points, and will advance to the States Competition in Mount Olive along with Team #26308 "Nano-Gurus 4.0" from Rockaway and Team #28805 "GHS Robotics" from Green Township.

The advancing teams will compete against 54 other New Jersey teams at Mount Olive High School on December 10.