

NASA Lunabotics contest draws college students to Titusville

BY MICHELLE SPITZER • FLORIDA TODAY • May 28, 2010

TITUSVILLE — Chris Farnell sat in "mission control" and used a laptop computer to navigate his team's robot through an obstacle course designed to replicate the moon's surface.

"I'm trying to go straight, but it won't let me," Farnell said. When he realized the robot's wheel track broke, Farnell added: "We might as well just play with it at this point. I wanted to put a disco ball on it just in case something like this happened."

The 26-year-old electrical engineering student and his teammates from the University of Arkansas are competing against 21 other universities in the NASA-sponsored Lunabotics Mining Competition. The two-day event, held at the Astronaut Hall of Fame, wraps up today.

Teams are given 15 minutes to maneuver robots they built in the Lunarena, a 24-foot by 25-foot box filled with a light, fluffy soil, similar in texture to the terrain on the moon.

Students sitting in a small room and viewing their robots via video cameras have to guide them from one end of the box, through an obstacle course filled with rocks, to the other.

The robots, weighing no more than about 176 pounds, have to then pick up some of the dirt, make their way back to the other end of the box and deposit the dirt in a collection bucket.

The Lunarena is set up in a closed-off tent to help contain the dirt, which can be abrasive to inhale.

of the teams' robots malfunctioned, including one that caught fire.

Many of the robots got stuck, including the University of Alabama's robots -- they were the only team who had two, a small one on top of a larger one.

"We thought we'd save some time by having one dig while the other dumped," said Babatunde Ajilore, an electrical engineering student.

Despite the setbacks, competition organizers said students are getting a chance to experience tasks NASA employees are currently engaged in.

"This is real technology that NASA is working on and this competition is a fun way to show the work and for students to learn," said Susan Sawyer, project coordinator for the competition.

Officials are hoping this will also encourage students to continue their studies in the STEM fields, science, technology, engineering and mathematics. This is the first year for the competition, which had such a good turnout organizers said they plan to make it an annual event.

Teams came from as far away as Iowa State and University of North Dakota. Florida Tech gave the competition a hometown presence with its robot "Attila."

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"It functions like a standard backhoe," said Bruce Monteleone, 22, of Palm Bay. "When you're working on a project like this you have to just keep testing and testing. There are a lot of things that can go wrong."

Since none of the teams successfully deposited dirt on the first day of competition, officials said they will give them a second chance today.

"We're looking forward to another round to show everyone what we can do," Ajilore said.

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Students from the University of Arkansas wait Thursday for their turn to dig in the Lunabotics Mining Competition. (Michael R. Brown, FLORIDA TODAY)

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