

Statesman

Robotics team reflects on competition season, eagerly looks to future

By **Conor O'Bryon**

Posted May 8, 2017 at 12:01 AM

Updated Sep 22, 2018 at 2:20 AM

The Westlake robotics program recently wrapped up its competition season, which culminated in a trip down to Houston for the For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology Championships, referred to as “World Champs.”

“Our school district had four teams at World Champs this year,” robotics coach Norman Morgan said. “We had 2468 Team Appreciate, the Philobots and the Rhomans, and then we had a team from Hill Country [Middle School] competing as well.”

The robotics program at Westlake consists of FRC (FIRST Robotics Competition) and FTC (FIRST Tech Challenge) teams. The teams build robots that take part in competitions with a defined contest or challenge. The FRC team is 2468 Team Appreciate and is the “varsity-level” team, while FTC, the “JV level,” is comprised of multiple individual teams such as the Philobots and Rhomans.

At World Champs, six divisions, or competitions, occur simultaneously. Teams compete to win their divisions, and those winners advance to the next tournament level. 2468 Team Appreciate was a division finalist, which is the highest they have ever advanced at World Champs.

Prior to World Champs, the FRC team competed in competitions in Lubbock, Dallas and Silicon Valley, which were qualifying competitions for World Champs. However, this year the team had already pre-qualified to attend the tournament.

“Last year at World Champs, we won an award called Engineering Inspiration,” Morgan said. “That qualifies you for the next year’s World Championship. We’ve actually won that award twice in the last three years. We’re pretty proud of that fact, because [each year only] four out of 4,000 teams in the world get that award.”

After getting a larger space at the beginning of the school year, robotics has invested in more equipment. The new machines are supported in part by the robotics nonprofit WESTA (Westlake & Eanes Science & Technology Association).

"[The] new space is awesome," Morgan said. "We've already increased our number of machines this year, [and] we've got an order to purchase some new equipment this summer. Some of that comes through the finances from the school; most of it comes through finances that we generate through summer camps or through grants and support of our nonprofit."

Since the FRC team is mainly comprised of juniors and seniors, a good portion of the team leaves each year.

"We graduate about half our team every year," Morgan said. "The remaining half become the leaders, and you have a whole bunch of students coming in that have to learn very quickly — it's like drinking from a fire hose — because the knowledge and skills required in a very short time period is really tough."

Junior Chris Hillin was a design lead this year in FRC.

"Being a design lead was very beneficial to me," Chris said. "It put me outside of my comfort zone, in a position where I had to make decisions and lead a team, which I had never had to do before."

Even though the end of the school year is rapidly approaching, robotics isn't winding down for summer.

"Our program runs year-round," Morgan said. "Our students will start to work on projects over the summer, [on] outreach projects or summer camps. This coming summer, our program is hosting 20 robotics and STEM education camps."

Chris thought that overall, the past year went well for the team.

"I think that everyone on the team grew, as a designer, as a manufacturer, as an electronics lead," Chris said. "I think it's amazing how far we've gotten. I would've liked to have gone further, but I thought it was pretty awesome."