



Trumbull High sophomores Dan Regan and Alex Mark demonstrate the Robotics Team's creation that competed in the New England Botball tournament last year. Thanks to a grant from local businesses, the team hopes to do better at the April tournament in Brooklyn, NY. (Photo by Donald Eng)

Business grants support school clubs

By Donald Eng
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With the help of a \$2,000 grant from the town's Business Education Initiative, the Trumbull High School Robotics Club hopes to

improve its performance at this April's Botball tournament in Brooklyn.

After weeks of preparation, all the members could do was watch their creation as it acted on its own at the 2007 tournament in Lowell, Mass. When

all was said and done, the team finished sixth in New England. This year it aims for much more.

"The key to the robotics tournament is that your robot can't receive any signal at all from the controllers," said

THS sophomore Dan Regan. "Modern uses for robotics are such that, like the robots we use to explore Mars, they have to be able to act autonomously because it takes five minutes

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for signals to travel to Mars.”

A total of 17 school-related programs received more than \$16,000 in grant funding from the group at its annual breakfast meeting Tuesday at Tashua Knolls.

A collaborative effort between the town's schools and the business community, BEI distributes grants of up to \$2,500 to support educational programs that fall outside traditional school programs. In addition to the Robotics Club, recipients includ-

ed Madison Middle School's All About Gardening program, a Chinese after school program, St. Catherine's school store and St. Joseph High School's biotechnology club.

The meeting also included a video demonstration of Frenchtown School's political video presentation, where students compiled a video of the school's Democracy Day, including footage of candidates' remarks.

“This program is completely the work of the students,” said faculty coordinator Larry Stowe. “All I do is stand back and watch.”

Standing and watching is all the Robotics Club members did, too. At least, that's all they did at the competition. The weeks leading up to the annual tournament were an entirely different matter.

“During most of the year, we meet once a week after school,” said sophomore Matt Rescsanski. “But in the weeks leading up to the competition, it was more like every day. Some nights I didn't even get home until 10 p.m.”

Even the night before the contest, the club was hard at work, burning the midnight oil in a Lowell hotel room as the members put the finishing touches on their 300-line program.

“I think we probably annoyed some of the other guests, with our robot beeping all night long,” Mark said.

Under tournament rules, the team receives a box of robot components seven weeks before the competition. Members also learn what task their creation must complete. Last year the task was to sort green and orange balls by color in less than two minutes.

“The organizers provided us with a kit of parts, and we had to construct our robot using only what came in the kit,” said sophomore Alex Mark.

The team's final creation con-

sisted of a self-propelled vacuum body called a Roombawith a control arm that scooped up balls and fed them into a small hopper that the team built on top of the vacuum. The contraption also included a small camera, which the team mated to a computer and wrote a program enabling the camera's optics to discern colors.

Though the end result sounds like a complicated piece of machinery, Regan said the team did its best to follow the KISS (Keep It Simple Stupid) philosophy that organizers recommend.

“The kits they gave us had enough pieces that we actually

built a second, sweeper bot to clear away obstacles and earn bonus points,” Rescsanski said. “And there were a lot of pieces left over that we never used. Some teams used sonar to help guide their robots.”

There was a sonar set inside the kits. “A small one,” Mark said.

Regan said the team members don't know what task the entries at this year's competition will have to perform, but he is confident that the team, in only its second year, will improve on last year's performance.

“Whatever we have to do, we'll win it,” he said.