

(Left to Right) (Back row) Robotics Coach Trevor Toenjes; Michael Barnes; Tucker Toenjes; Kameron Folks; Isaac Meyers; and Mr. Brown, principal. (Middle row) Rachel Hoff, Tiana Acosta, Jackson McMullen, Daniel Hopengarten, Joey Moore, Nathan Esamann, and Dylan Breyer. (Seated) Gabriella Lamont, Chris Dugan, Jenna LaPlume, Tillie Palma, and Mae Walker.

The Little Robotics Team That Could

By Concetta DeLuco

There is the popular saying, "great things come in small packages," and in the case of Plumb Elementary's Lego Robotics Club, Team Pelican, those words never rang so true.

But instead of one tiny package came about 14 small ones in the form of fourth and fifth graders whose drive and determination landed them a first place trophy for "Best Robot Performance" at the local qualifying First Lego League tournament.

"You kids are absolutely amazing," said Trevor Toenjes as he addressed the winning team during a victory celebration held at Plumb Elementary's library on January 12 and that came complete with Lego themed cakes and plenty of supporting parents and teachers.

"I've never seen a group of kids work so hard and be so dedicated," he said.

As the founder of Team Pelican, Plumb Elementary and Pinellas County's first ever Lego Robotics team, Toenjes, proudly recounts his version of this rags to riches tale where his team of

To his dismay, Pinellas County did not have robotics clubs for elementary school kids and he spent the next two years trying to get one off the ground at Plumb Elementary.

Finally, this past fall he got the support he needed from the new principal and Trevor's second grade teacher, Connie Allen, who agreed to sign on as the club's sponsor, making it official.

"She really did it on a leap of faith," he said, "there was no precedence in Pinellas County, and so many ways it could go wrong, but she agreed to it anyway."

Come November, however, the club faced new problems. It lost its sponsorship and had to reform as a PTA club. The change meant a new meeting time, which Toenjes says left a lot of parents frustrated and cost the team half its members.

The setback didn't stop the remaining teammates from "showing tremendous dedication" and working 40 plus hours during their Christmas break to play catch up.

motley elementary students not only beat out competing middle and high schoolers for the title.

"We didn't expect to win at all. We just went to compete and hoped to not be embarrassed," he said.

Each year, the First Lego League or FLL encourages local robotic clubs to participate in their annual competition. This year's theme, "Body Forward," meant teams had to explore the cutting-edge world of Biomedical Engineering to "discover innovative ways to repair injuries, overcome genetic predispositions, and maximize the body's potential."

At the regional competition hosted by USF on January 8, each group built and programmed a robot using "Lego Mindstorms" technology to accomplish missions, such as programming the robot to apply a cast to a bone (all made out of Legos), and scored points in three 2.5-minute matches on the themed playing field.

With a landmark victory and unusually high score of 270 points out of a possible 400 for the first round of the tournament, Team Pelican placed well above the second place score of 195 "blowing the competition out of the water," Toenjes said.

But what makes the victory the sweetest, he says, is that the tournament was not only the rookie team's first win, but also their first time competing ever.

Getting to that point, however, was the biggest challenge. From week to week, we felt like we the whole thing was going to fall apart," he said.

Team Pelican was officially formed at the end of October 2010. Inspired by his son, Tucker, who Toenjes claims was "more advanced in his computer skills in the third grade than most teachers," and after a visit to the "Tempest in Tampa," another robotics competition, Trevor was intrigued and determined to get his son involved in a local club.

One of the youngest groups at the competition, and sporting simple T-shirts with merely their team logo on it, Team Pelican was the epitome of the underdog, says Caroline Palma, the mother of 10-year-old Tillie, a teammate. "They didn't even have a uniform. When they came in (to compete) they didn't look the best, but they definitely did the best."

Tillie worked the Lego mission board along with her friend, Jenna, during the winning round of the challenge and brought the team to victory. "It's wonderful, I just feel so pumped," she says with a smile that stretched from ear to ear. "I know now we did once and we can do it again."


By the end of the first round, the story goes that the stress and excitement of it led 9-year-old Jenna to tears.

Sporting a pair of Lego piece earrings, the same oversized T-shirt she wore into battle and holding the prize during the celebration on January 12, Jenna claims it was all worth it "for the trophy."

"It feels so good to see how much time you put in and it finally pays off," said Tillie.

In the meantime, the group is at work preparing for next year's competition and helping the newly formed junior robotics club, made up of second and third graders, with their project.

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