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Goal! Soccer robot scores

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STAFF WRITER

In the middle of a robotics competition Sunday in Trenton, the Pascack Valley Regional High School District's robot suddenly balked, refusing to move.

"This is painful to watch," said Kevin Killian, a math teacher and the team's coach.

But the team tinkered with the robot, getting advice from other teams. And in its next round, the machine charged across the field as if it had something to prove, and scored a goal.

In the end, the Pascack Pi-oneers, of Hillsdale and Montvale, were part of a three-school alliance that won the FIRST Robotics Competition's regional games at the Sun National Bank arena in Trenton.

"The kids are so excited," Killian said after winning the championship. "We've always had this as a goal."

The 61 high school teams — which also included groups from Mahwah and Clifton — had gotten their challenge in January: Build a robot capable of playing soccer. Extra credit if the machine can also hook onto a bar and hoist itself up.

At the arena over the weekend, the low-slung robotic vehicles clambered over bumps, collided with walls (and each other) and scored the occasional goal. A few teams managed to hoist their robots, but many others fell victim to Murphy's Law — familiar to every inventor, even those long out of high school.

The FIRST Robotics Competition aims to encourage students to consider careers in science and technology. Many teams make a special effort to recruit girls, who often show less interest in math and technology. Killian said his team has about a dozen girls, about a quarter of the total.

Erica Hopkins, a Mahwah High School senior, joined her school's robotics team in her freshman year because "it was something unique — most schools don't have one."

"It gives a lot of problem-solving and critical-thinking skills that will help me in college," said Erica, who hopes to major in physics, math or a related field.

On the Clifton High School team, which is new this year, the boys gravitated to

programming the computer, while the girls did the hands-on work of building the robot, said Radhika Kasabwala, a sophomore.


Teams competed this weekend on one side of a black screen draped across the arena's floor. Behind the curtain was an area called "the pit," where students in safety glasses clustered around their machines, doing last-minute adjustments and repairs. As the teams brought their machines through the crowded aisles in the pit, they called out, "Robot coming!"

The Pascack team now heads to the national championships next month in Atlanta. Killian said the experience showed his team the importance of collaboration.

"This is an excellent example of what the robotics competition is all about," he said. "We got advice from other teams facing the same problem, and it wound up working. The teams were really cooperating with each other."

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Jared Warsoff, Michael Killian, mentor Don Rotolo and Nicole Rifkin, top, cheering the Pascack Pioneers on Sunday in Trenton. Above, Dan Gugger making adjustments to Mahwah's robot.