

STUDENT ROBOTICS COMPETITION SET FOR CAPITOL HILL

"Creates Thirst for Excellence, Rewards are Lifelong Skills and Self-Respect"

WASHINGTON, DC -- If you think ball-playing robots invading Congress sounds like a science fiction script, then think again -- and mark it on your calendar for next month.

Congressional proponents of technology education are sponsoring a national exposition in mid-June featuring a robotic one-on-one competition. A dozen high school teams from across the country will cheer on their robots' attempt to pivot around mechanical competitors, scoring points by heaving large balls into eight-foot goals.

The Capitol Hill competition is designed to underscore the work of a unique foundation -- called For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology (FIRST) -- and its highly successful nation-wide student robotics program. The day-long event will run from 9:30 am to 4:30 pm on Thursday, June 18, in the foyer of the Rayburn House Office Building, directly across the street from the US Capitol in Washington, DC.

"These projects combine technical sophistication, practical know-how and old-fashioned teamwork," said US Rep. Bill Delahunt, who proposed the Capitol Hill competition after seeing robotics teams in action in his Massachusetts congressional district. A key to FIRST's success is mentoring by corporate R&D shops and academic engineering departments -- breaking through the classroom wall to use all conceivable tools and incentives to "educate" students in the fullest sense. In addition to mastering applied math, science and technology on deadline, the student teams -- some of which exceed 55 members -- must manage a variety of fundraising, marketing, public relations and administrative tasks.

"These remarkably ambitious projects are national models for science education," said Rep. James Sensenbrenner (R-WI), Chairman of the House Science Committee, a co-host of the June 18 event. "These kids emerge with a keen sense of their own potential, and with the tools to succeed professionally in a rapidly-changing workforce."

"It imbues on-the-job training with competitive adrenalin," said Andrew Allen, FIRST's president, a former NASA astronaut who served on three space shuttle mission crews -- including as commander of *Shuttle Columbia*. "After the students work nearly full-time for weeks for a day of two-minute playoffs, the rewards are lifelong skills and self-respect."

"The competitions create an intensity of thirst for achievement that often seems reserved for NCAA or NBA finals," Rep. Delahunt said. "Educators are finally learning what sports promoters and good parents have long known: we can create *demand* for excellence among kids."

Reps. Delahunt and Sensenbrenner organized the Congressional competition with the help of their colleagues, John Sununu (R-NH) and Silvestre Reyes (D-TX). Taking part will be teams from Massachusetts, Texas, New Hampshire, New Jersey, Arkansas, Ohio, Michigan, Illinois, Indiana, Connecticut, Alabama and New York.

Over 9000 students on 205 teams participated in regional contests leading to FIRST's national finals earlier this year at Epcot Center in Florida. Televised by ESPN and with a crowd of 12,500 screaming from the sidelines, it had all the excitement of national student athletic championship.

Each team is issued an identical trunkful of raw materials and a \$425 credit to purchase additional supplies, then has six weeks to collaboratively design and construct a robot capable of competing in a designated event. The students taking part in the Congressional expo have built remote-controlled robots capable of picking up and maneuvering 24-inch rubber balls to a goal located in the center of a playing field. The teams have two minutes to score points by placing as many balls as possible on the goal's racks, while maneuvering around two other competing robots.