

MECHANICAL MENTORS



Tim Moog, THE BATTALION

Emrys Landivar, an eighth-grader at Brazos Christian School, works on the "secret weapon" portion of his robot. The robot will be judged Saturday.

Teen-agers and Texas A&M students put down footballs and gear up their minds in a competition that will test their mental mettle.

By APRIL TOWERY
 THE BATTALION

Winning over the minds of seventh-, eighth- and ninth-grade boys from football to math and science is not a simple task.

Brazos Christian School teacher Kent Knudsen, along with Texas A&M students Michael Wiene and Lee Estevez, decided to take on this task in early September when they began "mentoring" six BCS students in their creation of a robot.

Fifteen area schools are participating in the Brazos Best robotics project, to be held Saturday at A&M Consolidated High School. Thirty-seven teams from around Texas will advance to the Texas Best competition in November.

Wiene, a mechanical engineering Ph.D. candidate, said his part in the project is guiding the students in their quest to be the "Brazos Best."

"First priority is to make sure they leave with the same number of fingers they came in with," he said. "[We] alert them when they're going down a road that will eventually lead to a dead end and give them alternative ideas. Occasionally they override us, and they're right. We let the kids make all the final decisions."

Jon Jeter, a BCS student involved in the project, said he has learned about teamwork during the five weeks they have been working on the robot.

"I learned that we're never very successful working on our own," he said. "It's great to see that together we can make our ideas work. I also learned that you do use algebra in real life."

Jeter's classmate, Emrys Landivar, is "the rules guy" for the group, which means he is in charge of keeping up with the project guidelines.

At the competition, the robots entered can be no larger than eight cubic feet. Robots will be judged on a special grid, where the students guide the robot with a remote control. Three stu-

dents can enter the grid area at a time — a driver, assistant and a loader. Then the students rotate positions so everyone can participate. There is a double-elimination process in which winners advance and losers go to a consolation bracket.

Landivar said he is excited about the competition. "We're competing with A&M Consolidated, Bryan High and Allen Academy, schools that have 25 people on their team," Landivar said. "Who would imagine that this little school would go compete — we only have one ninth-grader on our team."

The ninth-grader, Ross Bonnes, said he has gained technical experience from the project.

"I want to be a mechanic," he said. "I like anything that deals with machines."

The students work on the project with Knudsen and the Aggie mentors three to four days during the week after school and a few hours on Saturday and Sunday. Knudsen said that the average team spends 18 to 24 hours a week working on the robot.

He also said although this is their first year to participate the project has gone well.

"The guys are developing science and math skills in a way that is more exciting than science fair," Knudsen said. "It has an element of stretching imagination and creativity. Everyone has a different talent to bring to the group."

Four of the six students on the BCS team are also involved in the school's flag football team, but Richard Harding said robotics has taken precedent for now.

"I'd rather do this than football," he said. "Now we can be known to bigger schools that we are here and we can do this. We have our own uniqueness."

Landivar has mixed emotions about football vs. robotics.

"If we have tackle next year, I'll seriously have to consider what I want to do."

Wiene said that, by contributing to the kids as a design team, he has learned about group dynamics.

"Every time you work with a team, you learn something," he said. "We're constantly faced with new challenges just keeping the kids focused."

"When they are faced with something difficult, their first inclination is, 'This is hard, let's do something else.' We try to help reach their goals and stick to what they thought was important initially."

For more information about robotics, the BCS students have put together a web page. The address is <http://www.geocities.com/timessquare/8741/robhome.html>.

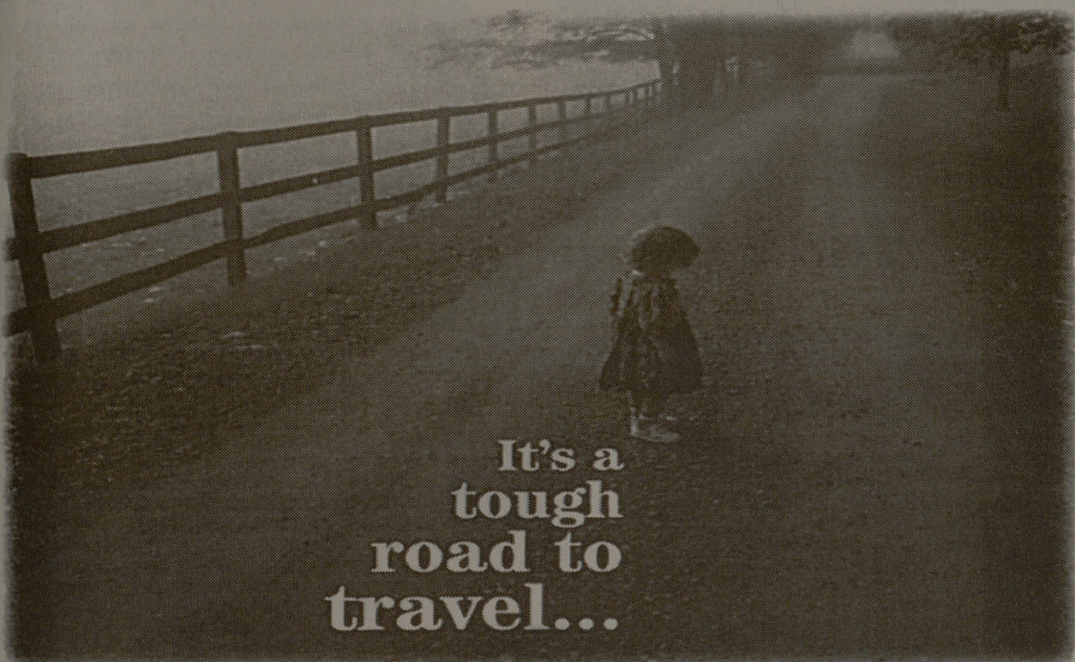
They said that the time they have put into the project will pay off when they compete with the other schools.

"Time well spent is well-spent time," Landivar said.



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Jon Jeter, Michael Wiene, an A&M mechanical engineering graduate student and Emrys Landivar work on the robot's motor.



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