



ROBOTS TO THE RESCUE

■ As schools look to boost STEM, robotics runs at THS, PHHS

BY DARCY WALLACE

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Pleasant Hill and Thurston swept many of the top spots in the first scoring meet of the season Saturday, Nov. 22 – in robotics.

Held at Junction City High School, the meet challenged students in a robotics mini-course in the school cafeteria, as students maneuvered the bots around obstacles and up ramps, conducting brief tasks via computer.

Pleasant Hill's 'Gromit's Grommets' placed first, followed by two Thurston teams – 'Phalanx' in second and 'Subsonic' in third. Junction City's 'Blue Dwarves' were fourth, followed by 'Storm' (fifth) and 'Player 1' of THS.

Polly Kohl, Thurston instructor, led the Colt's robotics teams Saturday; while placing third, Subsonic's highest score of 137 tied the Grommets high school – yet despite having just one team at Saturday's event, the Billies appeared to build upon its successes from last season.

In general, having robotics meets is a positive development in a region that often struggles to bring students into STEM fields, Rick Faber of Pleasant Hill FTC said.

"Other teams around Oregon and the rest of the country have much further advanced robots for the same challenge," Faber said. "Few local high schools have many tech offerings, and while robotics programs are flourishing in Southern Oregon, the south valley region is lagging far behind."

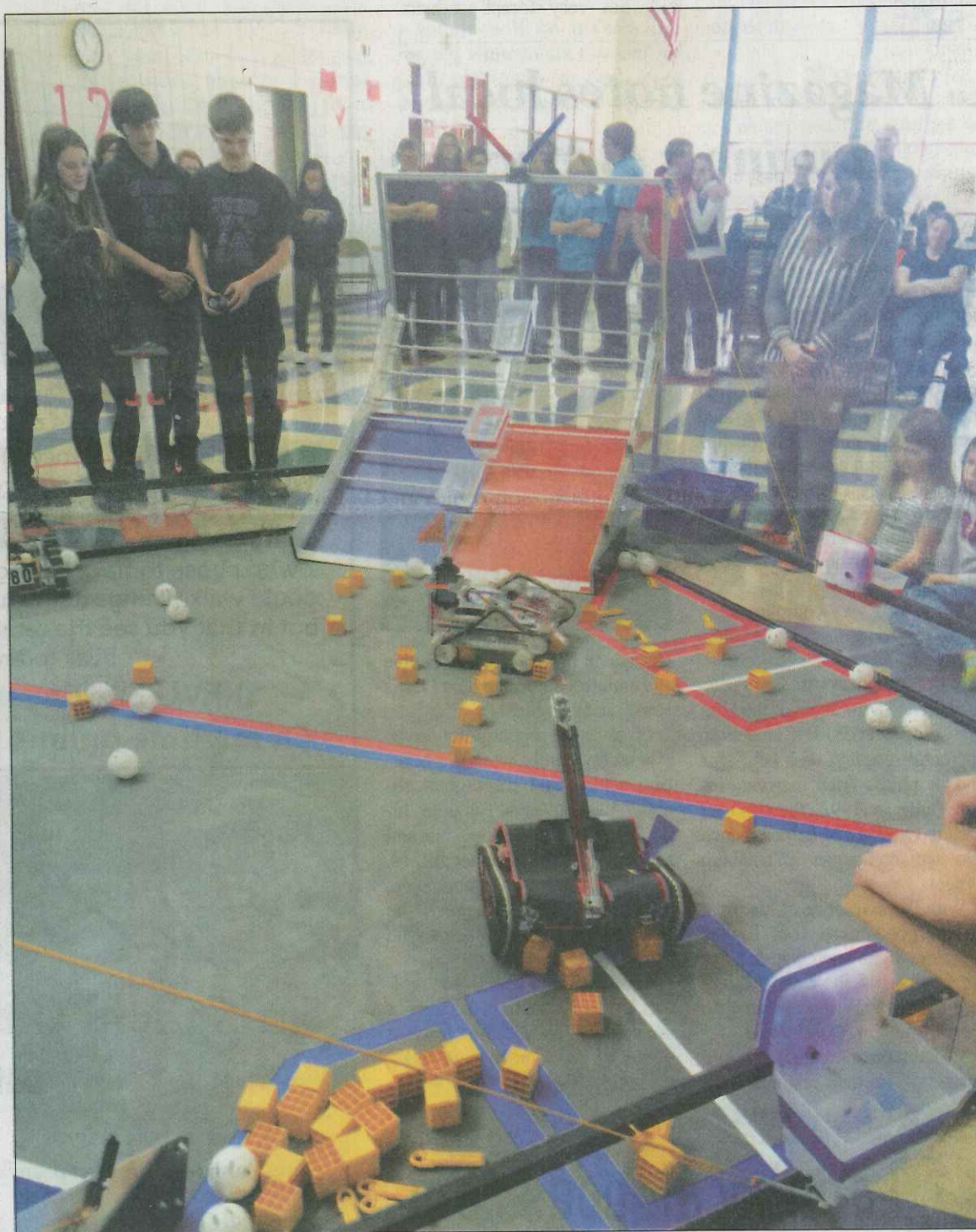
The solution? An obvious fix might not be immediately apparent; increasing awareness and improving opportunities, such as competitive robotics events, could help.

This year, robotics' students from the South Valley region (where Pleasant Hill and Thurston are located) are addressing the challenge themed around mountain rescue. While more complicated, in layman's terms the course includes corner structures as 'mountains,' 'climbers' to rescue, debris fields to navigate through, and shelters for the robots to take them to, among others.

"This year we have an entirely new Electronics Platform," Faber said. "The robots are powered by current Android devices, and most teams are using Google's Android Development Studio for programming the Phones/Robots. They sit in front of the same development environment as professionals do around the world."

According to Kohl, Thurston's instructor, two more scored meets remain, followed by a championship, all at Junction City High School.

In the first meet, which some instructors called 'Meet Zero,' teams had the chance to field-test the new tech; in later competitions, the students are adding new functionalities, testing new designs, and learning what works – and what doesn't, Faber said.



Photos by Darcy Wallace

Above, high school teams from Pleasant Hill, Thurston, Junction City and Monroe Middle School gather around the robotic simulation Saturday, Nov. 21. Top left, the mountain rescue mission – at least, one simulated by robots – is about to get underway Nov. 21 at Junction City high school.

The Colts brought four teams to the contest, placing as high as second Top right, Thurston robotics students examine components to a robot at the Nov. 21 Robotics meet at Junction City High School.