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## An imaginary planet, an evacuation, robots; contest preps students for the future



James Thomas/For The Virginian-Pilot/For The Virginian-Pilot

**Dalton Virtue, sophomore driver for Blackwater Robotics, can't look while awaiting judges' scores. The Blackwater team's alliance ultimately won top ranking finisher at the competition.**

By James Thomas Jr.  
Correspondent

Blackwater Robotics got off to a slow start, losing three qualifying matches but then rallied to win nine of its next 12 challenges and finished at the top of the First Chesapeake District Portsmouth Event as part of a three-team alliance.

Franklin High School's Blackwater team was one of 37 robotics teams, including several from Hampton Roads, that competed at the Portsmouth challenge from March 15 to 17 at Churchland High School. The top finishers at the event, including Blackwater, became eligible to advance to the district championships in mid-April at George Mason University.

“It’s the best feeling ever when you build something in six weeks that’s capable of winning and takes you to the next level,” said Ayanna Hudson, a sophomore and human loader on team Blackwater.

Churchland High School has hosted the Portsmouth event for the past several years, said Leighann Scott Boland, development director of First Chesapeake. It is one of many First Chesapeake competitions happening through April in Virginia, Maryland and Washington, D.C.

More than 1,000 middle and high school students from the mid-Atlantic region and a visiting school from Massachusetts competed at this year’s Portsmouth event. First robotics competitions are held worldwide each year with more than 4,000 teams competing, Boland said.

The 2019 season is called “Destination: Deep Space.” Students were given six weeks to “conceptualize, design and build” a robot for the competition, she said. Teachers, coaches and volunteer mentors from main event-sponsor Newport News Shipbuilding and partners, including NASA and Dominion Energy, offered technical assistance.

“These are industries that will be looking to hire these students in the future,” Boland said. “We are building tomorrow’s technology leaders.”

The Churchland school gymnasium floor became a landing surface on the imaginary planet Primus, which crews were racing to evacuate. Group alliances of three teams were randomly chosen for Saturday’s qualifying matches, but the top ranking teams were allowed to choose allies for the Sunday elimination rounds.

Bleachers filled with cheering, foot-stomping fans created an atmosphere akin to an athletic event or pep rally during the competition. Several fans donned costumes as "Star Wars" or "Minecraft" characters or painted team logos on their faces and wore festive headgear.

Scores and rankings were determined by how well teams directed their robots to load cargo of rubber balls into spaceships and attach plastic disc hatches onto ports by remote control. Each match lasted about two and a half minutes.

However, rankings were not only based on the highest scores in competition. Judges visited teams in pit areas and awarded points on their overall knowledge about science and robotics.

“They look at safety,” said Danielle Morgan, former robotics team coach at Churchland, now physics, chemistry and computer science teacher at Suffolk’s Star Pointe Academy. “They look at how team members work together and strategize with each other. Some people are good at driving; others are better at building, programming or repairing the robot.”

Boland said, “We use robots as the vehicles to not only reinforce STEM concepts but also to reinforce life skills to develop the whole person. We encourage cooperation; we want them to learn how to work with others and learn from the ideas of others.”

Churchland's Royal Robotics team qualified for the Sunday challenge but got eliminated in the quarter finals. They must wait until the end of First Chesapeake competitions to find out if they scored enough points to advance to the district championships.

Team captain, Alysha Morgan, a sophomore and second year member of the team, said her experience on the team has been rewarding.

"I'm something of an introvert and was a bit nervous about it at first," she said. "But I've gained confidence since joining. It's easier to communicate with others now, and it kinda helps relieve stress."

Franklin's Blackwater Robotics team has been to the district championships several times, said sophomore team driver Dalton Virtue.

"We went to the national championships several years ago but that was before I got here," he said. "Making the national finals would really be special."

The First World Championships or national finals are slated for Houston, April 17-20, and Detroit, April 24-27. Top ranked teams from those events become eligible for international competition.

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