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Cal Poly Mentors Guide High School Robotics Team to World Championship

SAN LUIS OBISPO -- A robot named Titan showed all the right stuff at the 2011 For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology (FIRST) Robotics Championship in St. Louis in April. The Atascadero High School students who designed and built Titan – The Greybots – is now ranked among the best in the world. Mentored by Cal Poly students, the Greybots were part of a winning alliance that included teams from San Jose and Cook County, Ill.

The Greybots' achievement is widely credited to Adam Heard, a Cal Poly mechanical engineering student who served as lead mentor for the team.

"It's about so much more than robotics," said Heard. "There's not a lot out there that teaches high school kids how to win like this.

Some parents ask, 'Why are you pushing our kids so hard to compete?' My response is that if these kids start thinking about other aspects of their lives the way they think about their team, they're going to be way more successful."

"It's a huge project to build a competitive robot in six weeks," said Ralph Nicovich, Cal Poly's FIRST coordinator with local high schools. "The team approach shows kids how to solve big problems they could not do alone – big time."

Heard first became involved with the Atascadero team four years ago. "At the time it was run more like a social club and science fair. It was a cool experience for the kids, but they weren't being exposed to what real engineering is, so I felt that's where I could make an impact. I could give back the experience given to me."

And on top of it, he adds, it's just plain fun.

"The team has more than 20 machine shops that make parts for us," said Heard. "The robots have more than 200 unique parts – all powder coated and anodized. They look beautiful. Even if there were no other benefits, this would be fun to do because of all the ways to apply what I'm learning at Cal Poly."



Software and programming, so integral to a robotics team's success, were heavily influenced by another Cal Poly mentor Ross Light.

“Software was not their strong suit,” said the second-year computer science major, “and robotics is a riveting way to get students tuned in to technology, engineering and science. There are those breakthrough moments – like when students put down a little bit of code, and they see an arm move.

“I think I helped the students treat this like a real software project – and I owe a lot to my computer science work at Cal Poly,” said Light. “When I was in high school, I was self-taught, just like many of these kids. Having more formal training, I can show them how to organize code, how to conduct tests.

“There’s nothing like seeing a student come from not knowing anything about engineering or programming to their being excited in a ‘What do I get to do today!’ way. Some of my peers ask if I don’t want to just kick back after a long day at school. All I can say: ‘This is better.’”

for more information on the FIRST program, go to www.usfirst.org

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