

Not just building blocks

[By DENNIS HUSPENI](#)

November 11, 2007 - 1:14AM

Groups of students clad in colorful uniforms cheered loudly Saturday as they watched months of work unfold on the field of battle.

But this wasn't an autumn sporting match on a college campus — it was a battle of the minds played out with Lego robots.

Almost 300 youths participated Saturday in a southern Colorado regional tournament of the First Lego League at the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs.

Using Lego Mindstorms robotics systems, 29 teams of 10 built minirobots that performed a series of tasks on an obstacle field built around the theme of energy conservation.

"I just really like seeing the programs work," said Kristin Hardy, 13, of Discovery Canyon Campus. "You plug it in, download it, whir and bam — it works!"

Hardy was a member of the Nuclear Thunder team. With green shirts and bright yellow hard hats, team members talked excitedly about the skit they prepared to show what they had learned.

Tournament organizers sent out the theme this year — "Power Puzzle" — to schools from south of Interstate 70 to Durango. The teams, ages 9 to 14, worked after school to build and program the robots.

They were judged Saturday on the quality of their research, team spirit, best performing robot and most original robot. Along the way, they learned about things such as energy conservation, hydrogen fuels, cells and engineering.

But that was all secondary to the fun.

"This is pretty amazing," said Marie Bush, tournament director, surveying the five fields of competition on 8-by-8-foot tables. "This is getting them excited, and it's an opportunity to display what they can do. It really is amazing what they're capable of."

Bush, a UCCS engineering student, said she enlisted many of her professors to help. Many UCCS students and area high school students served as volunteers and mentors for the teams.

Members of team "DWIGHT" (for Discovery's Wildly Intelligent Generally Helpful Teens) watched as their robot navigated the course in less than 2½ minutes. They jumped up and down in excitement, cheering at each successful task completed.

Wesley Hileman, 12, plugged in wires and fixed arms on the robot in an attempt to get it ready for its last task.

“You got 40 seconds, Wesley,” coach Delwin Turner barked.

They slapped high fives and cheered at the end.

“I was worried when it didn’t drop the arm,” Hileman said. “I practiced that a lot.”

Hileman’s mom, Ellie Claggett of Glen Eagle, said Wesley played with Legos his whole childhood, so a Lego robot was the natural next step.

He volunteered to do extra chores around the house if she would let him join the Discovery Canyon club.

“They’re learning about robotics, engineering and programming,” Claggett said. “They’re having a fun time, but they’re learning.

They don’t think about it that way — we’ve got them fooled!”

Claggett said she enjoyed watching them grow as a team.

“They really helped each other solve problems,” she said. “One might not know how to do something, and another would come along with the answer.”

Bush said she hopes the tournament becomes an annual event.

CONTACT THE WRITER: 636-0110 or dennis.huspeni@gazette.com