

FIRST Class

UNH Hosts Teens and Their Robots at Regional Robotics Competition

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Flying balls, scoring goals, and cheering teammates are no strangers to UNH's Lundholm Gym. But motors, circuit breakers, and robots? Not so much. Except on March 6 and 7, when more than 1,000 teens and their remote-controlled ball-players

come to UNH for the regional FIRST Robotics Competition. Nearly 40 teams from five New England states will compete in this “varsity sport for the mind, building and programming robots to compete in a robotics game called Aerial Assist (watch it in action).

[FIRST \(For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology\) Robotics Competition](#) pits teams of high school students, mentored by professional engineers, against each other for a shot at the national championships and millions of scholarship dollars. Each team has six weeks to build a robot that will meet the challenge of the competition’s game from a common kit of parts.

“The students who participate in the FIRST Robotics Competition are not only building robots, they are building character, self-respect and relationships with their peers,” said Dean Kamen, president of Manchester’s DEKA Research & Development, who founded FIRST in 1989. “Winning the game is fun, but the importance of FIRST is that you’ll get much more out of it than you put in, and it’s going to change the rest of your life.”

At the UNH competition, which is free and open to the public, high school teams will benefit from the mentoring, volunteer support, and inspiration of UNH faculty and students. Former FIRST competitors like Jamison Couture ’17 (the mechanical engineering department’s FIRST scholarship recipient), Carolyn Przekaza ’15, Simon Popecki ’17, and graduate student Damian Manda will help keep the action in “the pits” running smoothly, as will graduate student Caleigh MacPherson ’12, Jonathan Wilson ’13, and Jonathan Shepard ’14 of UNH’s award-winning [LunaCats](#) lunar mining team.

“This is a great opportunity to promote STEM education and feed the STEM pipeline,” says Brad Kinsey, professor of mechanical engineering and chair of that department and a veteran FIRST judge. “When he started FIRST, Dean Kamen said he wanted kids to get as excited about technology as they do about sports. That resonates with the mechanical engineer in me.” Kinsey will serve as judge co-advisor for the UNH event, helping the many judges make decisions on the awards, which are both technical and non-technical.

Kinsey isn’t the only faculty member in on the action. Mark Popecki, senior research scientist in the Space Science Center (and father of Simon) is mentoring the local Oyster River High School team and serving as field Supervisor for the UNH event, and associate professor of civil engineering Ray Cook will help referee for the event.

And the College of Engineering and Physical Sciences, which is coordinating much of the competition, is rolling out the red carpet to these future STEM undergraduates, hosting a reception and campus tours in collaboration with the Office of Admissions. And representatives from some of UNH’s most impressive STEM-related student projects, such as the LunaCats, the [Precision Racing Team](#), and [SeaPerch](#) underwater robotics, will be on hand to meet and mentor the FIRST competitors.

To volunteer for the FIRST Robotics Competition at UNH, contact Nicole MacMillan, CEPS career development and internship counselor, at (603) 862-0997 or nicole.macmillan@unh.edu.

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