

Building a better robot

■ Youngsters with an eye for science — and Legos — compete to see who can build best eco-themed machine

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Robots did battle to make the world a better place yesterday, only they weren't in some far-off galaxy, but in the stretch of Suffolk County known as Middle Island. And instead of shooting lasers, they moved wind turbines, all at the touch of a button.

It was all part of an eco-friendly competition among 45 teams, each consisting of up to 10 kids between the ages 9 and 14, who combined their love of Lego with their scientific know-how in the fourth annual LI FIRST Lego League Tournament Power Puzzle at Longwood High School.

The contest, co-sponsored by School Business Partnerships of Long Island Inc., called for kids to build alternative-energy themed robots out of Lego and then program them to compete in three 2½-minute faceoffs. Among the missions performed were planting trees, harvesting corn and mining uranium.

Team Elite 1337 from Massapequa won the Champion's Award (a trophy made of, surprise, Lego) and the chance to compete at the World Festival in Atlanta in April against more than 100 international teams. Nine other awards were presented, including ones for research, programming and design.

The robot designs included golf-cart-like vehicles with solar panels, and a hybrid car that com-



NEWSDAY PHOTO / JULIA GAINES

A Southold team, watched by two judges, competes in the Lego League Tournament yesterday at Longwood High School.

bined a truck's body with E.T.'s head that was designed by Awesome Plastics, a team of eight boys from Roslyn. It cost about \$800 for parts and software, and the parents shared the cost.

"Most of them are honor students, some of them are on sports teams and then they put this on themselves," said Laurie Ackerman, mentor of the team that includes her son, Shane, 13. "And they're loving it and learning. We're going to do it again

next year."

The competition wasn't a boys' club. Six Girl Scout teams from Nassau County had robots in competition thanks to a grant from Motorola Inc. Lego Ladies of Hempstead, which had solar energy as the theme of its robot, found that keeping local Boy Scouts out of their project was almost as much of a challenge as programming their robot.

"We had to cover the windows when we were working be-

cause they wouldn't leave us alone. They were so upset that they couldn't be involved," said Elana Muniz, 13, programmer of the team, which finished sixth.

Teams had to give research presentations to judges on the alternative energy source tied to their robots, explain about programming and design and make structures from a deck of cards within a five-minute period.

"The exercise with the deck of cards gives the judges the

chance to observe how well they interact as a team," said Janet Anderson, director of LI FIRST. "Teamwork is an important lesson from this."

The lesson wasn't lost on Shane Ackerman. "I really learned a lot, about working as a team and about science," he said. "It was just a lot of fun and I liked having everybody over at the house. I didn't think of it as work, it was more like an after-school sport."