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Southold robotics team reaches quarterfinals of world championship tournament and finishes its year with 54-8 record

By Bob Liepa



Team RICE 870 co-advisor Bob Gammon (second from left) with drive team members (from left) Tom Cardi, Sofia Gillan, Declan Crowley, Brian Schill, Matthew Schill and Ava Rose in the pit area with their robot at the George R. Brown Convention Center in Houston. (Credit: Christine Schade/courtesy photo)

The Southold High School robotics club's Team RICE 870 had already shown it was more than a big fish in a small pond with triumphs at the [Long Island regional level last month](#). Still, there was no way of knowing for sure just how good the team would be on the grandest stage of all until it was put to the international test.

Team RICE passed with flying colors, reaching the quarterfinals of the FIRST Championship that was held at the George R. Brown Convention Center in Houston last Wednesday through Saturday. After ranking second among 75 teams in the qualifying round of the world championship tournament with a spotless 10-0 record, Team RICE lost both of its matches in the playoffs, finishing the year with a 54-8 record. The first playoff loss snapped a 44-game win streak.

"Being on a world stage, everybody plays the game differently, so that added another dynamic that we hadn't seen before," team co-advisor Christine Schade said. "It was stressful. It was exciting. It was a week full of emotion, but it was also a week that I really believe the kids will never forget."

For most of them, it was a brand new experience, their first appearance in the world championships, but not for Team RICE. It was Team RICE's seventh appearance in the world championships and fourth in seven years. World championships were not held in 2020 and 2021 because of the coronavirus pandemic.

"We are now competitive at a world-class level," co-advisor Bob Gammon said, "but really my biggest takeaway from the whole thing was through these big tournaments there are highs, there are lows, there [is] drama, you know, good and bad, and the character these kids showed, especially the drive team from the highs and the lows is really what I'm most proud of. I mean, the robot performance was awesome, but the way these kids carried themselves through the turmoil of the tournament was world class in itself."

The club brought 23 students, 11 adult mentors and the two co-advisors on the trip. The drive team consisted of driver Declan Crowley, Tom Cardi, Matt Schill, Sofia Gillan, Brian Schill and Ava Rose.

"I expected us to be able to compete, but we went above and beyond," said Declan, a Greenport junior.

With six fields set up in the convention center and tens of thousands of people in attendance, it's quite a show.

"You look around and there's like 35,000 people there," said Sofia, a Southold sophomore. "Hearing that crowd go wild every time you win, the noise is insane."

Team RICE — an acronym of the team motto of "respect, integrity, compassion and equity" — had built what the club advisors called the most advanced robot in the club's 20-year history. Initially, the robot was called "Bad Bunny" because it looks like a rabbit, but it later became known as "Houdini" because of its magical performance.

In robotics competitions, three teams, each with a robot, form an alliance to compete in games against other three-team alliances, with the aim being to shoot balls through an elevated hoop. It looks like robots playing basketball.

Team RICE needed to up its game this year in order to advance as far as it did.

"We made the transition from a solid A, knocking on the door of an A-plus, so we're right there," Mr. Gammon said. He added, "The advances that we made with the robot allowed us to get to the position that we were in."

Team RICE won two Long Island regional titles last month, bringing it nine overall. The club became the first Long Island student robotics team to earn successive double regional titles after pulling off a double in 2019, according to the club's advisors.

"We've gone up against teams that are sponsored by these huge companies, so the fact that we're able to go up against them and compete with them is really insane," Sofia said. "We're so proud of ourselves for that."

Bob Liepa is the sports editor for Times Review Media Group, where he has worked since 1992. Raised in East Meadow, the Long Island native has won both Writer and Sportswriter of the Year from the New York State Press Association. [✉](#)

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