

The 8th Annual Battle O' Baltimore

September 20, 2014

Hundreds of high school age girls and boys -- some wearing sports jerseys, some in Comic-Con-worthy costumes, still others donning sparkling blue fedoras -- pour into the building shortly after dawn as the latest rock, pop and hip-hop music booms loudly over the P.A. system. They text their friends in the crowd and meet up to stake their claim on a spot in the stands, aiming for a good view as they prepare to spend their entire Saturday watching performances featuring DJ Fireball, LuNaTeCs, One Heartbeat, Sketchy, PSicotics, The Hammer of the Gods, and Spectra.



So it's yet another music and arts festival? Well, sort of. Rock concerts have always been cool, but this day is all about "the new cool," the term coined by author Neal Bascomb in his 2011 book of the same name about this fascinating sub-culture movement that is rapidly hurtling toward the mainstream.

The event is the 8th Annual Battle O' Baltimore, one of the premier off-season tournaments in the explosively popular world of FIRST.

So it's a sporting event? Well, sort of. FIRST is a progression of programs for kids ranging in age from 6-18. Borrowing heavily from the glamour of the entertainment business and the thrills and excitement of professional sports, FIRST has the ambitious goal of making science and engineering just as thrilling for young people as Hollywood and the NFL.



The deliberate, methodical worlds of science and engineering? Thrilling? Isn't that an impossible dream in a world where a kid barely has to think these days? Where she can just ask Siri any question and have the answer in seconds? Dean it works. The inventor of the Segway, the iBot all-terrain electric wheelchair, various medical devices and other innovative technologies, founded the non-profit FIRST organization back in 1989, and held the inaugural FIRST competition with a small handful of teams in a high school gym. Since then, FIRST has been on a rapid growth trajectory, now encompassing tens of thousands of teams from dozens of

countries around the world, and boasting four distinct levels of competition, all culminating in the FIRST World Championships, affectionately known as “The Super Bowl of Smarts,” held annually each spring in St. Louis’ Edward Jones Dome.

So how does FIRST do it? With robots.

Through the FIRST programs, kids of all ages



are learning to build purpose-built robots in Junior FIRST LEGO League (for 6-9 year olds), to FIRST LEGO League (for 9-13 year olds), the FIRST Tech Challenge (14-18 year olds) and at the highest level, the FIRST Robotics Competition, in which teams of high school students, working closely with volunteer mentors, many of whom are professional engineers and technology professionals as well as teachers and parents. Each year, they are given a detailed rule book for a completely new, custom game invented



specifically for FIRST, along with a box of miscellaneous parts, virtually no assembly instructions, and a strict six week deadline to design, build, test, and practice with a 120 lb. robot capable of playing the new game. Along the way, teams are encouraged to engage in Gracious Professionalism, part of the FIRST ethos, which emphasizes the value of competing at the highest level while also collaborating, helping and respecting your competitors.

The Battle O’ Baltimore itself is an unofficial, off-season competition, but make no mistake – the drama, thrills and excitement are palpable.



The event was organized by a group of volunteers affiliated with teams in the region, known as the Baltimore Area Alliance, as a highlight of Baltimore Innovation Week, and was made possible through the support of sponsors including the Maryland Space Business Roundtable, STEMaction,

NASA, PIE³, VMW Freight Express, and MAR - Mid-Atlantic Robotics.

The main event featured a tournament focused on the 2014 FRC game called Aerial Assist, which combines the best parts of the NBA and the World Cup, but which is played entirely with robots, operating autonomously at the start of each match, and then driven for the remainder by student drivers positioned at the far end of the field, using their custom software running on driver laptops with USB joysticks plugged in. In Aerial Assist, alliances of three teams compete by driving their robots to move balls down the field and score them in goals to earn points. The more the robots and drivers assist each other by passing the ball to their alliance partner robots, the more points they can score. Of course, their opponents are also playing defense. Announcers with voices right out of the world of professional sports keep the crowd informed about who is competing in each match, and provide play by play coverage of the action.



Teams from Maryland and surrounding states from Virginia to New York converged on the McDonogh School near Baltimore for this year's Battle O' Baltimore, which happened to coincide with the bicentennial of the event's historic namesake, the Battle Of Baltimore, which inspired Francis Scott Key to write the lyrics to what later became our national anthem.

After a first round of seeding matches, the top seeded teams selected alliance partners to compete with in the final elimination rounds. When all was said and done, Team 2537 "Space RAIDers" from Atholton High School in Columbia, Maryland, team 1885 "ILITE Robotics" from Battlefield High School in Haymarket, Virginia, Team 4945 "Titanium Wrecks," from Ocean Pines, Maryland, and Team 422 "Mech Tech Dragons," from Maggie L. Walker Governor's School in Richmond, Virginia, emerged victorious, while other teams won awards for everything from spirit to technical excellence.



For more information about FIRST Robotics, including opportunities to mentor, sponsor or form a team, see <http://www.usfirst.org> and/or contact the Baltimore Area Alliance battleobaltimore@gmail.com. Follow the Battle O' Baltimore on Twitter @BattleOBmore.

Photos courtesy of TechBrick.