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Former Shepherds Take Israeli Team to the Top: Team RobOrde Ranks First Place at Competition



Photos courtesy of FRC Team 2214

For a school comprised largely of at-risk, poor, orphaned youth whose birth countries include Ethiopia, the former Soviet Union, and Brazil, it's nothing short of amazing that *FIRST* Robotics Competition (FRC) Team 2214 "RobOrde" from Yemin Orde Youth Village School (YO) in Israel, is one of the top ranking robotics team in its country and a Regional Winner at the FRC Israel Regional.

The rookie team, comprised of some 20 teenagers, recently beat over 30 other teams in the Israeli section of the qualifying rounds with their robot, RobOrde, which granted them entrance to the *FIRST* Robotics Competition Championship held in Atlanta last spring. Somewhat surprisingly, Team 2214 did it without the benefit of a mentor because their new science teacher was not familiar with robotics technology. The team spent five weeks building a prototype designed to walk on a low-friction surface, lifting two of its wheels at a time.

Thanks to corporate and individual sponsors, as well as the Israel Navy Shipyards, Yemin Orde is participating in the competition for the second year in a row. Israel has been competing in the program since 2005, and today the number of participants in the national qualifying round has grown to 1,200 students from 47 high schools ? more than any other country except the U.S. and Canada. More than 42,000 high school students on 1,683 teams from Brazil, Canada, Chile, Germany, Israel, Mexico, the Netherlands, the Philippines, Turkey, the U.K., and the U.S. participated in this year's competition.

"FRC is a brainstorming process. There is tension as well as a sense of partnership. When you're building the robot, you're busy with the technology. But once you're on the court, it's a sport and you want to win," says the team's captain, Guy Atanaw, 18, who is a native of Ethiopia and didn't know robotics existed before he connected with *FIRST*.

Another team member, and one of 20 science students who comprise Team 2214, Adam is a Muslim refugee from Darfur, who, at the young age of 16, fled his homeland in search of freedom, and made his way through Africa, Egypt, and finally, Israel, where he was jailed along with other Sudanese refugees for illegal entry. Ultimately, Adam arrived at YO, home and boarding school to more than 500 immigrant, disadvantaged youth from 20 countries around the world. Adam was one of the outstanding science students and the natural leader of the Robotics team.

According to Adam, who, despite his lack of formal education excelled at his studies and graduated from school with highest honors, *FIRST* is a true inspiration to everyone at YO. Because of his experience, Adam says he hopes to return someday to Darfur and help lead the efforts to rebuild the region.



Susan Weijl, director of outreach programs and development at YO, says that "our educational programs teach children how to move from survival to leadership," and adds that success in competitions like these helps to build student confidence and allows kids to realize "that they are destined for greatness."

Despite the downturn of Israel's high-tech industry ? according to Asaf Agmon, who supervises Israel's high school competition, the country graduates 4,000 fewer than needed engineering students a year ? high school robotics in the country is growing.

"Schools that take part (in these kinds of competitions) end up sending double the number of students to university engineering programs than the national average. The hands-on experience captivates them. A few years ago, these kids were shepherds in Africa. Now they're Israel's high-tech future," adds Agmon, a retired air force general who heads the Fisher Bros. Institute for Air & Space Strategic Studies.



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