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ALERT

Ratchet Rockers

Wentzville's robotics team is elite. It's aiming to be the best in the world.

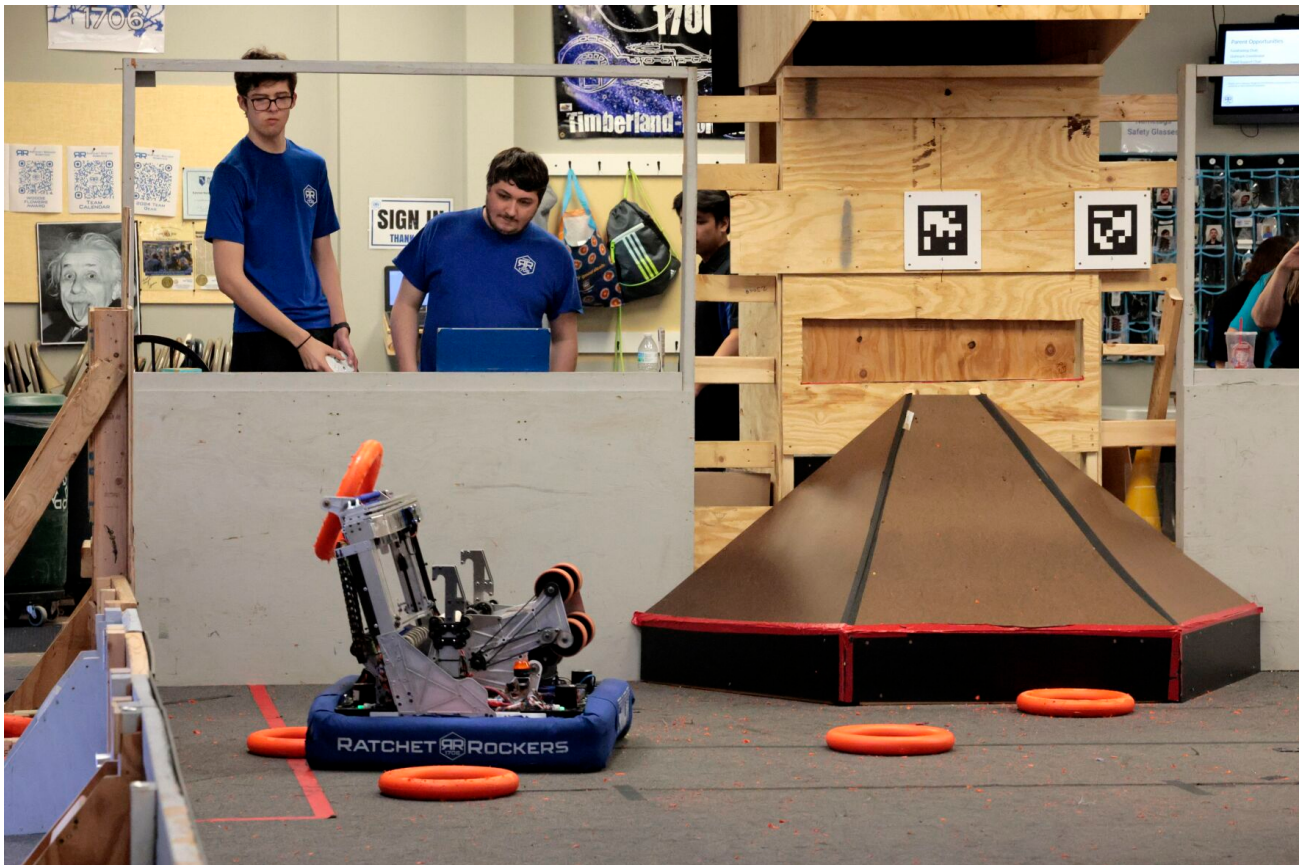
Monica Obradovic

Apr 18, 2024

WENTZVILLE — Wentzville's Ratchet Rockers robotics team is one of the best in the country. But the team of 32 students from high schools across the city wants to be the best in the world.

The Ratchet Rockers will test their mettle this weekend in the international high school robotics championship in Houston, where they'll battle hundreds of teams from the U.S., Israel, Australia, Turkey, Mexico, Canada and more.

"It's very competitive," said Darrell Wodrich, one of the team's mentors.



Driver Aden Buchanan, 18, left, a senior at Liberty High School, controls a robot named RIOT as mentor Emerson O'Hara watches during the Wentzville School District's Ratchet Rocker Robotics Team practice on Monday, April, 15, 2024, at their facility in Wentzville.

Laurie Skrivan, Post-Dispatch

The team is ranked ninth out of more than 2,800 teams in the U.S. — and they're ranked 11th in the world, according to the robotics tracking website Statbotics.

But they've been working furiously for months to prove they're even better than that.

Teams participating in this weekend's event, the FIRST Robotics Competition, were given an objective in January for their robot. This competition's theme is music, and each team's goal will be to launch foam rings called "notes" into goals, with at least 15 seconds of the match spent in an "autonomous" mode during which the bot operates entirely by itself.

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"I can't wait," said senior Blake Roach. "The adrenaline rush during that time is just so high."



Blake Roach, 17, a senior at Holt High, uses the mill machine to create new tire tread for a robot named RIOT as teammates Gus Benne, 17, left, Gabriel Mitchell, 17, and Joseph Mocca, 16, right, watch during the Wentzville school district's Ratchet Rocker Robotics Team practice on Monday, April, 15, 2024, at their facility in Wentzville.

Laurie Skrivan, Post-Dispatch

On Monday, three days before matches were set to begin, the Ratchet Rockers were preparing for their trip and performing their final tests on their 125-pound, industrial-sized robot named Riot.

Riot, named for a mid-2000s song by the rock band Three Days Grace, can throw notes into goals — or “speakers” and “amplifiers,” in keeping with the theme of the competition — at a speed of about 20 mph. In a practice arena, Riot zooms around with ease. At its fastest, Riot can move at 19 feet per second.

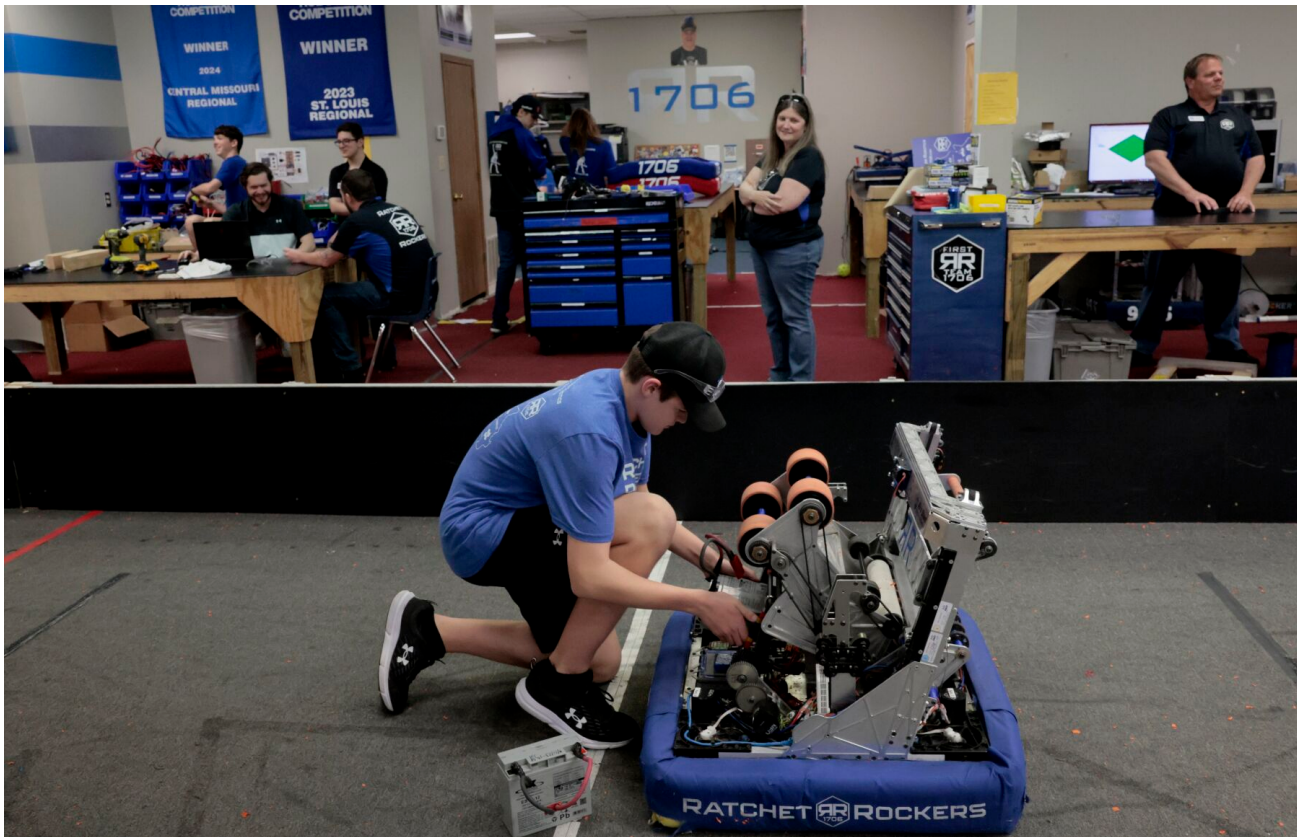
Students work on the bot four nights a week plus Saturdays, putting in hundreds of hours designing, building, coding and scouting the competition.

The Wentzville team already has a national reputation, in part because of their resources, team leaders said.

The Ratchet Rockers have an entire facility to themselves in the space of a former health center. And they're the only robotics team in the area with a full “field,” or a replica of the arena in which their robots will compete, Wodrich said.

Plus, a steady stream of alumni, volunteers and parents — many of whom haven't had a child on the team in years — serve as mentors to help the team strategize and build.

Hester Menier got involved with the team after her daughter joined. Her daughter has since graduated and gone on to study Information Systems Technology at Missouri S&T — where many of the Ratchet Rockers study after high school.



Brendan Buchanan, 15, a freshman at Liberty High School changes the battery on RIOT during the Wentzville school district's Ratchet Rocker Robotics Team practice on Monday, April, 15, 2024, at their facility in Wentzville. The team is traveling this week for a chance to compete for the title of World Champion at the FIRST Robotics Competition in Houston.

Laurie Skrivan, Post-Dispatch

Menier, an art teacher at Wentzville's Stone Creek Elementary, said robotics wasn't her "thing," but there's something to be universally understood about robotics teams. It's more than just assembling a cool robot, she said. Maybe even more than preparing for a future in STEM.

"This is a very neuro-diverse group. A lot of them are very introverted and can't even make eye contact when they come in," Menier said. "They have a hard time talking to adults, let alone each other. Being here and having to collaborate, they learn social skills and how to communicate effectively with each other."

That was the case for Ian Deal, who graduated from the Wentzville School District in 2019 after the Ratchet Rockers "changed the trajectory of his life."

"A lot of kids, including me, came in and could not talk to people," said Deal, now a manufacturing engineer in Hermann. "A lot of us come back and see all the things that we've done and the places we've gone. It's remarkable."



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