

Équipe Francobotique stands strong on the world stage representing Canada



As Aurora's Équipe Francobotique, an accomplished French-language student team in the FIRST Lego League, settled into the opening ceremonies at this month's WAFFLE International Championships in Worcester, MA, they were amongst their peers from 28 nations ? which were name-checked for an eager crowd.

Well, with one complication.

The Great White North was, for one reason or another, skipped over in remarks.

By the end of the event, however, there would be no denying our local Grade 5, 6 and 7 students as they raised the maple leaf after winning 1st Place in the Robot Performance Award in a very rare perfect score against 108 championship teams from around the globe.

?Watching them in the stands, I was so proud of our team, but I was so proud of Canadians because we were the only team from Ontario there and here was our little team of students up on stage with their Canadian flag held up and proud, presenting to the whole world,? says teacher-coach Renee Northrup. ?Everyone was talking about the French team from Canada against students who were all the way up to Grade 10. They're five years older and in high school and these guys got it done!?

This pride was shared amongst team members on Friday afternoon when they sat down with The Auroran to reflect on their experiences ? just an hour before setting out that evening for a celebratory night at Cineplex seeing How to Train Your Dragon.

?It means a lot to come back having first place in a robot match because this is my first year ever doing robotics, and I'm surprised we got this far,? says student Chase.

It shouldn't come as much of a surprise though for residents ? and local sponsors ? who have followed the team as they've gone from strength-to-strength year over year.

?I'm really proud because it's really hard to get a perfect score, and it's [with] 108 teams, so it's really hard to get first place in a robot game, so I'm really proud,? notes student Patrick.

Each year, students must build a robot that can take on a number of challenges related to that season's chosen theme: Water.

When asked what helped the team rise to the top, Northrup listed three key attributes: grit, perseverance and hard work.

?These eight kids never gave up,? she says, noting a few of the obstacles they encountered themselves throughout the series of

games, including falling just shy of a perfect score in one area when a couple of the krill fell out of the whale their robot was trying to feed. 'It was such an accidental thing, but everything went perfectly. We were so proud of them. We thought this would be their maximum score, but the kids were like, 'Oh, no, we came to this competition with a robot capable of doing a perfect score, we're going at this again.' In their very last match, the second last session of the matches before the very end of the international competition, the kids went to the table, just looked at each other and said, 'You know what? We're going to do this.'

'Scott and I, the two coaches, stood there and watched as they got every single mission done perfectly on the table and we had five seconds to spare at the end and watched the other team finish up and we cheered like crazy. We're super proud of them. They just never gave up.'

Adds student Madeline: 'I was like, 'Yay! We did it! I felt proud of our team for achieving our goal. That's why we came to this competition.'

As they celebrated their win in front of the international crowd, Équipe Francobotique also had the chance to let the world in on an innovative solution they presented here in Aurora last month at the Town's Youth Innovation Fair, which centred on new ideas to monitor freshwater lake health.

'It's a huge honour to present their innovation project on the main stage during the Closing Ceremonies in front of thousands of people in attendance from 28 different countries, 108 teams and all of their coaches and extras that came to watch them in competition,' says Northrup. 'There were also 3,000 people on Twitch that watched them live as they presented on stage.'

'It felt great and I felt nervous at the same time because thousands of people were watching us present our innovation project,' adds Allegra.

In the near future, however, many more thousands might benefit from the innovation project as the team takes it to the next level with a grant through the Learning for Sustainable Future fund and a partnership with the Federation of Ontario Cottagers' Association to deploy their product 'a new kind of buoy' into a lake in northern Ontario.

'Our solution addresses the problem of missing or incomplete water quality data in Canada and worldwide,' explains Chase. 'As a solution to this problem, we've created Century 226, a low-cost, autonomous, durable, reliable, and multi-parameter water quality measurement system that can be deployed in most freshwater bodies around the whole entire world.'

'What makes our project so different,' Patrick continues, 'is that it's very low-cost so researchers who don't have much money can buy it and, as it's autonomous, you don't need to send a professional researcher in a boat to collect data. They can just take their phone, put it close to the buoy, and Bluetooth connects it to the phone.'

Madeline adds from there the data can be downloaded and sent into an international database.

'The Federation of Ontario Cottagers Association (FOCA) has agreed to not only pay for construction of the buoy, which is quite large, about a metre-and-a-half wide by a metre-and-a-half wide, and they're actually going to deploy it in August and it's becoming the major research focus for FOCA for the next two years 'their little elementary school project!'' says Northrup. 'They've really revolutionized water quality measurement for Ontario and maybe worldwide once this thing gets deployed because their industry partner is going full ahead and is going to be deploying their idea, which is super-incredible!'

By Brock Weir