Students gear up for state science tournament

April 15, 2008

By Jeff Danna

Ace Hardware on First Street might have been closed Sunday afternoon, but there was a flurry of activity in the basement.

In one corner, eighth-graders Anna Marie Giordano and Anne Marie Pasternock glued small strips of balsa wood that would eventually become the frame of a glider. In another, seventh-graders Joey Kleinhans and Chris Watson used the same material to build a tower that would support a hanging weight. In the back of the basement, seventh-grader Hannah Kopach and eighth-grader Rachel Nugent practiced firing a ball out of a canon-like contraption made from PVC pipe, rubber bands and a mouse trap.

"Sandburg Middle School shooting for six meters!" the girls announced in unison before shooting the ball at a target across the room.

The group of Sandburg students gathered at Ace, as they have been since the beginning of the year, to prepare for the Science Olympiad. But this time the stakes were higher.

Two Elmhurst teams -- from Sandburg and Bryan middle schools -- scored high enough at the Regional Science Olympiad Tournament April 28 at College of DuPage last month to advance to the state tournament April 26 at University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. The victory is a first for both schools.

"Now we're just kind of tweaking things and getting ready for the state event," said Bryan coach Megan Mkrtschjan.

Both teams have been preparing for months, meeting after school to work on projects ranging from a robotic car, designed to pick up and move small objects, to a simulated forensic evidence lab, with which students must identify various substances left behind at a "crime scene."

Both teams are made up of about 25 students, but only about 15 actually compete, said Sandburg coach Nicole Pancratz.

The Science Olympiad is divided into three types of competitions: lab, building and testing. Each requires a different approach to
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preparation. For example, students taking part in the trajectory competition, such as Giordano and Pasternock, must build a device they can use to simulate the actual event.

"The judges could just tell you, 'I need you to hit this bar 100 meters from here,' " Mkrtschjan said. The students must know how to calibrate their device to hit that target with a ball.

On the other hand, the testing portion is like a classroom exam students must study for.

That's exactly what Bryan eighth-grader Ben Holmes was doing Monday afternoon. He was preparing for a meteorology test by studying printouts of weather system maps and weather terminology.

"It's really fun," Holmes said, noting that meteorology wasn't exactly a subject of interest before he joined the Science Olympiad team.

In some competitions, both teams will be looking to improve already high scores. Sandburg and Bryan both had numerous students place in the Top 5 for their events.

While the two schools are competing against each other, it's a friendly competition, the coaches said.

"The most important thing about this team is the amount of support we get from the parents and the community." Pancratz said.