Recount an incident or time when you experienced failure. How did it affect you, and what lessons did you learn?

I’d never really thought that 14 was my lucky number, and, in the year 2014, I was proven unfortunately right. For 14 hours each day I split my time between learning and preparing for the Science Olympiad National Tournament. For the 14 days before nationals, this was my schedule: get up; eat; homework; class; build; test; eat; sleep. Three days before my competition, on May 14th, I realized the flaws in my project, and, for the very last time - for the very last 14 hours - I worked out all the dents until I loved my Mission Possible sequence of transfers. Mission (im)Possible is an event where you build a device that transfers forms of energy. I had 14 out of 15 possible transfers, because I thought that this would be the number that would at least allow me to medal at the tournament, a confirmation of my efforts and my dedication to science.

On May 17th I awoke to a freezing dorm room, and took a frigid shower, yet I, filled with an internal combustion of both excitement and anxiety, was warm. I couldn’t have eaten more than 14 bites of my breakfast: food never wants to stay down when I’m nervous. I proceeded to impound my device.. The groups of judges were discussing a particular rule clarification about how the transfers were scored. As I listened I realized that many of the points I was hoping to get, simply wouldn’t count. It was now obvious that placing in this event was going to be more difficult than I’d hoped, but I wasn’t too worried, as my device was the smallest, giving us an edge point-wise.

At approximately 14:00 my Luck began to deplete. As we were setting up, our container for sorting golf tees, paperclips, and marbles began leaking enough to put Snowden to shame. “Ah %$#!” I pronounced in a testimony to my struggles. I ended up having to secure the hose clamp with scissors, which of course cut me. The leaking stopped, we finished putting in the 7 9 volt batteries, and , with only a minute to spare in our 30 minute setup time, I signaled the judges that we were ready to test. A large southern man with a wispy, white moustache came over. I have a tendency to, when speaking to someone with an accent, imitate them, so my southern twang, in all its glory, emerged. I still can’t believe that I told him “whenever Y’all is ready to start, I can.” So the timing began as my partner Ibrahim started pouring the items into the sorting container. Almost instantly I knew something was wrong: the match stick did not light. I knew that if I touched it, points would be taken off, but I needed the subsequent transfers to take place. As I scrambled for a match, the clock ticked. As I lit the match thankfully the next transfer occurred, the dripping of water used to take up 110 seconds as per request of the judges. TIME! The judges yelled. When the time went over three minutes, the cap and all subsequent transfers not completed in this time period would not be scored. I was in complete disbelief, as was my partner. Three minutes?! It had hardly felt like 30 seconds.

Upon later analysis I realized that the head of the first match split in half. It was faulty. Shock and disappointment came first: disappointment in myself for not noticing the dud of a match, for letting something so small waste all of my hard work. Since then, it’s become apparent that my efforts weren’t all in vain. After all, failure is the medium through which we learn most, and Science Olympiad is supposed to be a learning experience. I’ve become a master of circuits, 3D printing, chemistry, and mechanics. Mostly, though, I’ve learned that 14 is NOT my lucky number.