

Walking into my robotics class on my first day of school, I had many hopes. As a sophomore in a class of juniors and seniors, I was nervous about how I would fit in, especially after being online during the Coronavirus pandemic. Moving closer to the table, my biggest hope was to find a team. Watching the various juniors and seniors sit down at the tables around me, I began to muster up enough confidence to move tables and ask to join them. But, just as I was about to get up, two juniors sat down with me. I greeted them, and soon we started talking. Realizing that everyone else was somewhat nervous as well, I eased a little bit. We all got to know each other a little bit better and began to build our first robot together. Piece by piece, our first robot was beginning to take shape, and by the minute my fears of being alone and having less skill were disappearing. I thought I had been lucky, and had found a good team to compete with for the rest of the season. But I soon saw, this was not the case. After I started putting in more hours to work on the robot, I began to see the rest of my team's lack of interest in being as competitive as I wanted to be. A couple of months later, I was basically doing everything on the team. I was programming and building the entire robot by myself, while usually three to four people work on a robot. My next hope was to qualify for the state championship and then the world championship, setting me up to display my skills to other teams that I could join the next season. Sinking in hundreds of hours to improve my design and code, the state championship finally was around the corner. Of everything that happened during that hectic day, all I can remember is one image: seeing our winning score in the finals. I was astonished by our ability to reach the finals, especially since I was building and coding, and now one of the other teammates had started putting more work into driving the robot. Next, we went to the world championship, and we did better than I expected, reaching the round of 16 in our division. With a state championship in the bag and doing relatively well at the world championship, I started putting my name in for a couple of teams that had started to form. My hope once again was to find a good team, one that would match my level of interest. My hopes came true. I joined a team of seven, each of us willing to put in however much time and effort was required to succeed, to win. With this team, I was able to grow my own skills while we collaborated, a quality that I missed in my previous team. As we sunk hundreds, no, close to a thousand hours into our various robots and coding, my hopes for the state, UIL, and world championships began to rise. Although we had made a couple of mistakes throughout the season, resulting in not as many awards as we hoped, I felt like we had a much better chance at these late-season competitions, especially as we had tied up many loose ends. At the UIL state competition in Houston, we played pretty well, ranking first in the 6A division out of the top 30 teams in the state. In the elimination round (similar to the playoffs after the season), we played extremely skillfully and prevailed. Having won the UIL 6A state championship, we had our hopes set high for the Vex state championship (different than the UIL state competition). Once again, with both luck and skill, we won. Next, we had the two months between the state and world championships which we spent rebuilding our robot to make sure everything was as optimized as it could be. After the two months ended, we had our hopes set high: reaching the dome, the large auditorium where the grand finals were held between the divisional champions. During the next couple of days, we poured our blood, sweat, and tears into the robot. On the final day, we started the elimination round in our division, where any small mistake could cost the entire game, and in turn, the entire championship. With all of our skill (and luck), we managed to reach the finals of our division, one match away from the coveted dome. Sadly, we lost the finals. One of the reasons for the loss could be attributed to one of my mistakes, which I still have remorse for today. Now, in my final year of robotics at this school, I hope to share my two years of knowledge with new teams to enable the program to continue being competitive and to create an environment where even a single beginner can compete by themselves.