

SPACEPRIDE

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ONLY ONE TEAM QUALIFIES TO COMPETE IN \$1.5 MILLION NASA CHALLENGE

Team SpacePRIDE, based out of Graniteville, Travels to Worcester, Massachusetts for Possible \$1.5 Million Prize from NASA and is the Only Team Qualifying to Compete

Team SpacePRIDE was founded approximately 9 months ago and sought to compete in a challenge being hosted by Worcester Polytechnic Institute with prize money provided by NASA. This challenge is called the Sample Return Challenge, and it is based on having autonomous (self-driven) robots travel into a field to collect samples and then return them to the robot's starting position.

Most teams attempting this challenge were financially backed by either a company or a university. Team SpacePRIDE was completely independently funded by its members Chris Williamson and Robert Moore.

Chris Williamson lives in Graniteville, SC. He works as a machinist at Kenward Industries. He has competed in Robot Wars, BattleBots, and various national and local robot competitions. He now helps to lead several robotics panels at Dragon*Con. Through this, he is able to introduce robotics of many types to those who are interested. Over the past 3 years, he has mentored several FIRST teams. He currently mentors a local FIRST Team called the GearDogs, which hails from Silver Bluff High School.

Robert Moore lives in New Port Richey, FL and studied electrical engineering at the University of South Florida. He got his start in robotics while in college by competing in Battlebots and other robot combat events around the country. He currently owns Ares Design, Inc. which specializes in electronic design and embedded software development for a number of clients.

Amanda Walters is SpacePRIDE's newest official member and lives in Graniteville, SC. She is a Statistics and AP Calculus teacher at Silver Bluff High School. She has been with the team unofficially since its beginning. She is a "robot builder in-training," and has only been involved with robotics for the past 3 years. She is the team's Social Media Director and helps out wherever she can. She works with Chris as he mentors the GearDogs.

Team SpacePRIDE's strategy was different for most that were facing this challenge. Chris and Robert decided to try to complete the challenge using one large collection rover and two smaller "scout" rovers. The scout rovers were programmed to traverse the field to find samples then signal the sample locations to the collection rover. This strategy drew great levels of interest from NASA executives as well as from other visitors to WPI's event.

Chris, Robert, and Amanda traveled to Worcester, MA where five other teams joined them to try to complete this challenge. After many days of finalizing software and hardware, the teams were inspected for rule compliance and safety. Several teams did not meet the inspection requirements, and other teams simply were not finished building or programming in time. All considered, Team SpacePRIDE was the only team qualifying to compete.

Level 1 of the challenge took place on Saturday, June 16, 2012. The rover followed exactly as it was supposed to do, but its vision seemed to be distracted by a car on the sidelines that was the same color as a sample the rover was looking for. The rover then seemed to attempt to pick up the car (from a distance) and then tried to return to "home." In the process, the rover ended up running into a park bench. Definitely there are some glitches to be worked out of the programming and hardware, but the progress Team SpacePRIDE made was very impressive to the judges and to NASA officials.

While at WPI, there was a technology education event being held. The event was called Touch Tomorrow, and it brought in over 7000 persons to view campus. Many of the people present made their way into the robot pit area where they got a chance to talk with Chris, Robert, and Amanda about the rovers and their different mechanisms they are using to communicate and to determine position and location.

More information about this challenge can be found at WPI's website, NASA's website, or at www.spacepride.org.

If you would like more information on this topic or to schedule an interview with any team members, please contact Chris Williamson at (803) 392-1492 or Amanda Walters at teamspacepride@gmail.com.