

# Robotics reboot: Team rebuilds after changes implemented

Rudi Chamria/  
Lead Features Editor

Nick Zirinis/  
Lead News Editor

At the start of 2022-2023 school year, the High School Robotics team has implemented a plethora of changes. Following the departure of Robotics Director Wendy Stallings last school year, former Robotics Mentor Muktar Ali, who held the position from 2014 to 2018, returned to the school's robotics program as director.

Matt Furst ('23), captain of the Robotics team, said the focus this year has been to "rebuild" and "upskill" the team, improving elements such as quality of product, community engagement and team competency.

### Development of Robotics team

Due to COVID-19, the school did not permit students to travel during the 2019-20 and 2020-21 school years, and in the last school year, only Grade 12 members were allowed to travel, according to Furst. Therefore, current members of the Robotics team have never attended a High School competition.

Attempting to address this lack of expertise, Ali said one of his main focuses this year has been to reteach the team fundamental robotics skills.

"I very much took an approach where we're going to take things back to basics," Ali said. "So we started to do some master classes where we were just developing skills, basic skills, as if, you know, I treated everybody the same."

Moreover, Ali said the previous year's team, had missed "fairly fundamental issues that probably should have been spotted" while building their robots.

Scarlett Novak ('26), a new member of the team, said she heard stories of the building process being rushed in past seasons, and said the team prioritized "efficiency instead of quality," ultimately impacting their success

in the competition. She said learning key

skills has been a vital part of being an asset to the team, which has previously been dominated by Grade 11 and 12 students.

Furthermore, Ishaan Sareen ('24), Technical Director for the Robotics team, said one of the main targets of the team is to enhance engineering skills internally, and develop their product with precise measurements.

"We've been trying to take a more quantitative approach to strategy in terms of working out what mechanisms and priorities we set for the season," Sareen said.

Moreover, Matteo Salloum ('24), who is the Outreach Lead, said Ali has shifted the atmosphere and the mindset of the Robotics team. Salloum said this resulted in a larger focus on learning skills, rather than simply winning the First Robotics Competition, they take part in, which will be hosted in Los Angeles in March.

"He's really taken the whole culture and turned it on its head," Salloum said. "I see a lot more engaging, a lot more participation in the robotics program. Not only from the outreach standpoint, but also from just general robotics design. I think he's really focused on, like, making sure everybody's not only just participating in the competition, but ultimately develop skills for engineering, programming or marketing."

Additionally, Alexis Gerwe ('23), an Integration Lead for the team, said Ali also tried to address the team's lack of experience by combining the formerly two teams into one, larger, close-knit team.

"There used to be two teams that competed with identical robots because of how big the team is," Gerwe said. "But Mr. Ali changed that this year because he felt that we just needed a year to rebuild, and to make sure that all of our skill sets are up to where we want them to be for future seasons. So we decided to merge ... and

just have one big team."

Similarly, Furst said a large part of the team's rebuilding has been combining the two teams so that individual skill sets can be prioritized.

"Part of the rebuild is consolidating down back to one team, just purely because we don't have the experience as a program to make the two teams and we really want to just focus on upskilling everybody," Furst said.

Reflecting on Ali's decision, Gerwe said it was strategic to combine the teams.

"It was a very good decision choice for this year because after the last few years we've had in the program, a rebuilding year was really important," Gerwe said. "And his decision to address it the way he did, I think was very wise."

### Community outreach

In addition to the changes made within the formation of the team, Furst said community outreach has become compulsory this year. He said in order to qualify for the competition trip, members must complete a 20-hour minimum service requirement.

Salloum, who leads the outreach program, said this development has been critical for addressing the misunderstandings outsiders have about the program. He said many believe robotics is solely engineering-based, disregarding the instrumental marketing and outreach initiatives.

Ali said while robotics may be very design-oriented, it is vital that the program also prioritize building an engaged, positive community.

"One of the first key things that I wanted to do was kind of shift the perception about the program, like, it's not just about the mobile, it's not just about building a robot," Ali said. "It's about building and supporting this community."

Ali also said it is very important that robotics members integrate themselves into the larger London community and give back to those who may not have the same opportunities.

"It's really good to get our students outside of, you know, ASL and into the local community to give back and provide opportunities, which many, you know, students from the local primary schools would not have," Ali said. "I think that's a really good thing, and you know, if that's something that they take home, and they're like, really proud of, I think that's great."

Furthermore, Salloum said he would like to guide younger students like he has been guided by mentors in the past.

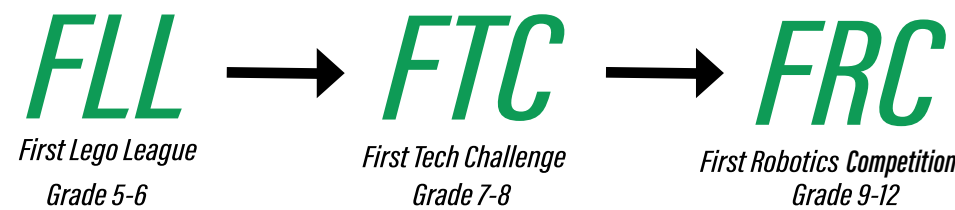
"I've been in the robotics program for a long time because of people that have inspired me in the past," Salloum said. "And I want to be someone who helps inspire other kids like me, while they're in like fifth, fourth and third grade to continue robotics."

Similarly, Furst said he also engages in community service by assisting younger students interested in robotics after school as well as helping plan competitions.

"One thing I do is I mentor FTC [First Tech Challenge] kids on Wednesdays after school, and then in addition, I've helped out planning the regionals for the fifth and sixth graders," Furst said. "But it's just a really great way to give back to the community and kind of share our knowledge."

Overall, Gerwe said the changes to outreach

### Robotics progression at ASL



and service has been very beneficial and important in setting higher expectations for the team.

"The focus on like social media this year and on outreach has both been improved," Gerwe said. "So, the standard this year is definitely higher, and I think you can definitely see it in the way that the team is moving in a good direction."

### Looking ahead

Ali said he can tell how excited team members are about the competition by their fascination with his stories about past competitions.

"One thing that I love doing is just sharing old, you know, competition stories with them, and kind of just reminiscing because there's so many good memories that we have," Ali said. "And it's really nice to see all the students kind of just captivated by the storytelling of, you know, the year when this happened or the year that, you know, we ended up winning or whatever. And you can see, they're so excited."

On a similar note, Novak said she is ecstatic about all the work the team has done, culminating in the competition at the end of the season.

"I just like seeing it all kind of come together because I've never done something specifically like this before," Novak said. "I mean, there's a lot of really smart minds like working on it, and watching it come together and we put in like a lot of hours a week, but I think that's kind of what makes it the most satisfying."

In regards to the team's performance at the competition, Gerwe said the team's main concern is its lack of experience.

"No one on the team this year has been to a competition, so we don't really know what it's like to compete," Gerwe said. "And that's our biggest issue."

On the other hand, despite having also never been to a competition, Furst said the decision to combine the two teams, and the resulting efficiency, has made him more confident about the upcoming tournament.

"Going into competition as one smaller unit and one type of team, I think we'll definitely have we will perform a lot better than we would have if we just done with the two teams," Furst said.

Salloum said one of the team's goals is to win

the competition, but also noted that developing skills is vital to each member's growth.

"We all want to win first place at a competition, right," Salloum said. "But that's not really the main purpose of our team. He's [Mr. Ali] mentioned before that we're sort of in a rebuilding year because no member of our team has competition experience."

Overall, Salloum said the new changes implemented will lead to further development of the team, and taking part in the robotics team this year has been a seminal part of his High School experience.

"I'm really excited to see what this team will do this year and in the future under his guidance," Salloum said. "And I'm really glad to be part of this Robotics

team, because I think there's going to be a lot of shared memories, and it's just been a very beneficial part of my life."

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Graphics by Rudi Chamria

Roughly **45** active participants

Photos courtesy of Sofia Linena

**12** partnerships students engage in

Data courtesy of Ishaan Sareen

Around **1100** community service hours

1. Perry Chen ('23), Siena Chae ('25) and Lamine Sao ('24) work on integrating one of the mechanisms into the base of the robot.

2. Trevon Ashton ('25) and Robotics Director Muktar Ali work on assembling wheels at the bottom of the robot.

3. The electronics team study a circuit to be built.

4. Clay Olson ('24) and Alexis Gerwe ('23) work on machining a part of the robot.

The leadership team met to plan the year ahead and engaged the whole team in bonding activities.

January marks the start of the build season as FIRST robotics release the project students will be working on. The team creates prototypes of future models.

The team travels to Orange County, California to participate in the FIRST robotics competition in early March.

The team starts training sessions to teach new and returning members skills which will be used during the building season.

Students work on physical 3D robot. Students finalize their model with working mechanisms and display at school-wide open house.

