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USU boasts 20th annual Physics Day event at Lagoon

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FARMINGTON -- Deafening cheers arose from a group of elementary school students Friday as their Lego robots slowly maneuvered, unaided, through a small maze inside the main exhibit pavillion at the 20th annual Utah State University Physics Day event at Lagoon.

Outside, high school students guided their robots by remote control in a grudge match, throwing balls into opposing teams' trailers.

Robotics has taken on a life of its own in many fields, such as medicine, manufacturing and technology. Physics Day at Lagoon displayed how that same enthusiasm has caught on with young minds.

Robotics students Coden Terry and Marc Hebbert, both in fourth grade at Bunderson Elementary School in Brigham City, spent 10 to 15 weeks building and programing their small (approximately 9-inch tall) robot. When finished, it was equipped with light, touch and distance sensors to direct its passage through the maze.

As the robot moved down a passageway, hitting a wall caused it to turn and feel its way past the obstacle, moving through one passage after another until the finish line was traversed.

The object of the competition was to get each robot through the maze without human interference.
"It's going to make it," Coden said as the finish line was in sight.

His mother, Neesha Terry, said her son and his teammate, Marc, were technologically minded -- video gamers -- before they started building the robot earlier in the year.

They were drawn naturally to the robots and other contraptions at the event.

"It is good for them," Terry said. "I think they are just getting their eyes wide open, looking at the different exhibits. They are more excited about the exhibits than they are about the rides. We haven't stepped a foot outside the pavilion since we got here this morning."

In other areas of the pavilion, and on tables outside, a large array of inventions were on display for judges and others there for the day.

Some measured centrifugal force while others focused on energy outputs and gravitational-based changes.

Kasey Anderson, from Century High School in Pocatello, Idaho, said talking to judges about his energy project has helped him expand his knowledge.

"It is really neat to be told about other physics principles than those which we had thought about," Kasey said.

Lance Eastman, advertising manager for Lagoon, said the event allows physics students to make projects and bring them to the theme park and see how they perform.

"We do this every year, and it is just a great opportunity for kids to come out and see science and physics in motion," Eastman said.

At the ever popular Egg Drop contest, students combined physics with riding the Sky Coaster. Eggs
nestled in sponges, Styrofoam, stuffed animals, bubble-wrap filled containers and the like were dropped toward a target from seats high above the trees.

Egg yolk splatter on the large plastic bull's eye indicated that some egg containers failed to provide the proper protection.

Maddie Pyne, of Thomas Edison Charter School South in Nibley, said her stuffed unicorn failed to protect the egg inside because of insufficient duct tape.

"The egg survived when it was tested at school, but not here because I didn't use duct tape here," she said. Another, less sturdy tape was used instead.

Dick Andrews, Lagoon vice president of marketing, said nearly 7,000 students were expected to attend the 2009 Physics Day.

"The point of Physics Day is, hopefully, to reinforce that there is physics all around us and turn kids on to physics," he said.