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CHS robotics coach Comer honored as an outstanding mentor



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By LAKE SUN, newsroom@lakesunonline.com

What started out as a regular competition weekend for the Camdenton High School Laser team in the St Louis Regional this month took an unexpected turn when the students came home with the Under Writer's Laboratory Safety Award for the eighth consecutive year, the Industrial Design Award and the surprise of the event, Coach Mitch Comer received the Woodie Flowers award finalist.

This award is presented to an outstanding Coach/Mentor in the robotics competition who best leads, inspires, teaches and empowers their team to advance in STEM fields.

In the competition, Comer and his team advanced to the semi-finals after competing in tournament play with 52 teams and were headed into the last game before the championship match when they were unexpectedly dealing with a broken switch on the robot. With the calm leadership of Comer, their alliance had to play two against three without the LASER robot and only lost by 35 points.

It's all in a days or weekends work for Comer who has been with the Robotics program since its inception in the Camdenton district.



Q & A with Mitch Comer

Q How and why did you get involved in robotics?

A As an educator I witnessed many students not making the connection between the science and math taught in the class room and how it is used in real world applications to solve problems. When I was a student, if a teacher could not tell me why or how the subject matter was going to benefit me in the future I wouldn't pay attention. Robotics helps to provided relevance to the core areas while also providing an opportunity to explore many career opportunities in STEM working in the robotics program along side adult mentors of various backgrounds.

Q What do you enjoy the most about it?

A Each student that participates in the FIRST LASER Afterschool robotics gains something different from the program and its mentors. Many are challenged for the first time or exposed to new technology or processes. Most of all, members of the LASER team learn to work together and collaborate with one another to complete an a near impossible task. Students utilize the design process to design a machine that weighs up to 120 pounds to compete in a game challenge within 42 days while still maintaining their course work for school. Students learn perseverance as inevitable problems and challenges arise that they must overcome to reach the end goal by the deadline. This and the confidence gained from doing the impossible helps provide them the skill set to succeed no matter what life throws at them.

Q Why did you become a teacher?

A My favorite classes in high school were industrial technology and shop classes and I enjoyed athletics. So it seemed natural to become a industrial arts teacher and coach. I have coached many athletic programs in 27 years of education. But I have found that coaching the FIRST FRC LASER 3284 robotics team to be the most rewarding. All lessons that students gain from athletics are also ascertained in the robotics program plus they are learning skills they will be use later in college and life. All my graduates can go "Pro" from the robotics program. Currently 94% of our graduates from the LASER team has gone on to a STEM related degree/career.

Comer is pleased to report the team has made repairs and revamped to compete at two competitions in Oklahoma and Houston. The team hopes to qualify for the eighth time to attend the world championship that will take place at the Jones Dome in St. Louis.

His determination and willingness to find ways to overcome the challenges his team faces and his ability to steer the team to championships may well be the catalyst for the Woodie Flowers award honor.

This prestigious award is given to one mentor from each regional and or district FIRST Robotics competitions. They then go on to compete at worlds for the championship Woodies Flowers international award. While the award is indeed

an honor, for Comer what really makes his work with robotics worthwhile is the students and their success. Watching them get interested and involved and putting their natural curiosity to work.

"My father was a 'jack of all trades' and I was in awe of all the things he could do around the house or in the garage. I learned to appreciate making and fixing things with my own hands at an early age as a result," Comer said. "I was always curious on how things worked growing up. I try to inspire this curiosity and ability to problem solve in my students today in my classes and through the robotics programs."

About Comer

Comer has been a Technology Education instructor for 27 years, teaching the last 20 years at Camdenton High School in Camdenton, MO. He started the Project Lead the Way (PLTW) program fourteen years ago at CHS and teaches the Introduction to Engineering Design and Principles of Engineering courses. Prior to teaching PLTW he implemented a modular technology lab and in addition developed a student produced Camdenton High Schools Student Television Network.

Comer was awarded the TEAM (Technology Education Association of Missouri) Technology Program of the Year in 2006. In 2007 he was honored to receive the ITEA Missouri Program Excellence Award and the TEAM Teacher of the Year in In the Fall of 2009. In 2010 he was recognized as the Camdenton R-III school district Teacher of the Year.

Comer applied for and received a small grant to start a FIRST® Robotics (FRC) team in the Fall of 2009. Since then, he has served as the head FRC coach of the Camdenton 4-H LASER 3284 robotics team and as the district Head Coach overseeing all four progressions of FIRST for grades 2-12. The LASER (Laker Afterschool Science Engineering & Robotics) program started with 21 students and 3 mentors and was fortunate to qualify for the FIRST® Championships in its inaugural season.

The LASER program now serves 240+ students in grades 2-12 in the Camdenton R-III Afterschool Program. It is one of the fastest growing FIRST systems in the United States and has been showcased at the world championship VIP showcase. In 2016 Mitch was named the Missouri FRC FIRST Robotics Coach of the Year.

Comer serves on the Career Technical Education (CTE) Advisory Council appointed by the Missouri Commissioner of Education for a three year term. He has served as TEAM Central District President and as Executive member of the TEAM board as PLTW representative, serves on the Camdenton R-III STEM

committee, is the Practical Arts Department Chair, has served on the CHS Leadership Team, and served on the CHS Technology Committee.

