

NEWS

Cambridge robotics team makes the podium in Greece

Middle schoolers get a medal in the FIRST Lego League World Championships.

by **Alex Degterev**

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The Juicebox Robotics team and their coaches (from L-R): Jordon Li, Erik and Sen Blankinship, Miro Vinck, Patrick Vinck, & Quinlan Blankinship. Credit: Bruno Muñoz-Oropeza

Like many a modern success story, the Juicebox Robotics team began this season in a Cambridge basement and ended it earning recognition on an international stage.

The team capped off a season of four top four finishes with a trip to Greece for the FIRST Lego League (FLL) World Championship. FLL is a global youth robotics competition in which players build and program

autonomous robots for a timed robot game while simultaneously developing an innovation project tied to a real-world theme. This year, the competition's theme was 'Unearthed', challenging teams to explore ideas connected to archeology.

While at FLL, the team placed third in the 'Alliance Cup,' which sees teams partner with randomly-selected companion teams and run collaborative missions.

The Juicebox team is a small but formidable grouping of three middle-schoolers – Quinlan Blankinship, Jordon Li and Miro Vinck — coached and mentored by Erik and Sen Blankinship, Quinlan's parents, and Patrick Vinck, Miro's father. They operate independently of any school or organization and has appeared under different aliases since it came together in 2019. The team was started by Quinlan's older brother, Forrester, now a sophomore at CRLS.



Jordon, Miro, and Quinlan explaining the engineering process for their robot. Credit: Bruno Muñoz-Oropeza

They put together a winning showing in Massachusetts competitions this year, earning first place finishes in two different categories in the Red Hawk Rumble 2025 Qualifier, followed by a third-place Champions Award finish at the 2025 FLL Massachusetts East Championship.

Erik Blankinship said that the team had expected to do “okay” this season, and that everyone was wary of the work required if the team did manage to move on in the competition. “The moment we got the [MA East] award everyone cheered, and then I think it took about five seconds and we went, ‘Oh my gosh, there is a lot more work ahead of us.’”

Since August, the team has met twice a week for two hours each session to help build and refine their robots. “Really, at its core, it’s not about robots, it’s about teamwork, dedication, follow-through and solving hard problems,” Erik Blankinship said.

Recently, Juicebox showed Cambridge Day its robot, a platform which the team has reconfigured with different mounts over the years. At first glance, it looks like a mishmash of Lego bricks and parts such as wheels and flat ramps. But a closer look at the robot as it glided around a play mat revealed different tools around its frame. Among those is a ‘French fry grabber,’ made with thin, mostly yellow Lego bricks that extend out accordion-style to push and maneuver objects on the ground.

Quinlan Blankinship explained that the robot’s autonomy was coded through Pybricks, a Python-based coding language tailored specifically to Lego robotics. “We used that because the default coding language which Lego provides ... gets very messy when you code [as much as we did].”

Beyond coding the competition robot, Miro Vinck spoke about the teamwork which went in to making their concept a reality. “We all had a part in designing this. I originally came up with the idea to make the robot arm and Jordon helped me build it, and then Quinlan found some design flaws and he helped finalize it.”

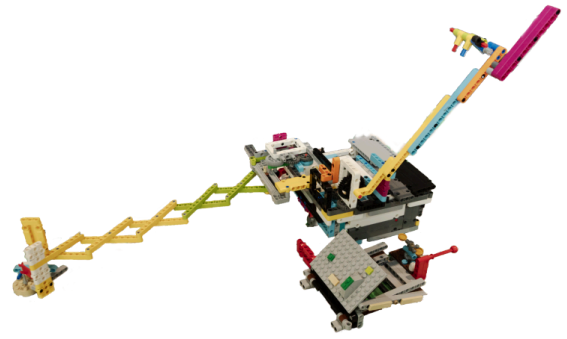
The team’s innovation project this year was creating a ‘mosaic’ robot capable of scanning and digitally rendering tile mosaics. Inspired by a trip Miro’s was able to make to Pompeii last summer, the team set about researching the idea and developing their robot with help from several local mentors and supporters.

They met with and received feedback from the Kendall Square-based Robotics and AI Institute, for instance, and Quinlan and Li, both part of Scouting America, separately presented their concept before a group of Scouting peers gathered at the Harvard Peabody Archeology Museum.

To further test their concept, the team also reached out to ARTAIC, a Boston-based company that uses robots to create custom tile mosaics, which suggested several engineering fixes to focus their project. Then came

several visits to MIT's Koch Center, where ARTAIC had installed a mosaic, to plan and carry out their 'proof-of-concept' test and managed to complete an automated scan.

The team said throughout the season it received an outpouring of support from the community. A fundraiser set up by the squad helped them raise a little under \$7,000, providing them with travel to and accommodations in Greece. There was also a community concert, held at the Union Tavern, to rally support for the team's trip. "It was really great to see everyone come together and support us," said Miro Vinck.



The Juicebox team's robot. Credit: Bruno Muñoz-Oropeza

Spyros Fotopoulos, a senior vice president at the Saloniki Greek Restaurants, one of which sits right off of Harvard Square, made sure that his business was a sponsor for the team's efforts this year. He was excited that they would be able to visit and compete in his home country of Greece, and also praised the team's ingenuity. "I would like to think that every business should ... invest in and sponsor anything that is innovative, especially when its coming from young kids."

Miro Vinck said that the team is uncertain about what exactly they will do next year, but he made it clear that the road was not ending here. "Next year we could do FLL again, or we could move onto some bigger competitions like FRC, and that's a big part of what we are thinking about right now."