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A View From the Stands
by Francesca Wilby

Imagine, if you will, the sound of hundreds upon hundreds of voices swelling and crashing over the melodies of 80's bands that are currently all the rage as long as you grew up in the eighties. Imagine blue-haired men somersaulting while holding flags. Imagine deafening cheers, hair spray, face paint, pom-poms, giant cows. Imagine competition with no rivalry or booing. This is FIRST, a program dedicated to science, education, really cool robots, and duct tape. (Lots and lots of it!) The acronym FIRST stands for "for inspiration and recognition of science and technology", which is a mouthful even for those who have had a sibling in this program for four years.

After a grueling six-week marathon of robot construction, charging batteries, smallish conflicts, and finding imaginative places to wear safety glasses, students conjoin to compete, mingle, do the Macarena, and still not sleep enough. It's three whole days of freewheeling rotoeering, punctuated occasionally with trips outside to eat or watch seagulls.

As the rounds progress, from practice to elimination to semifinals to finals, the matches get more and more intense. A crescendo of nearly unbroken screaming drowns out the music, with all the audience leaping to their feet as if they were attending a football game where something was actually happening.

Then the tension breaks with the final buzzer. Only three out of hundreds of teams have won this regional, but the other teams don't mind. The best part of FIRST, after all, is the fun, the adrenaline, and the friendships forged along the way.

Don't misread my smarmy attitude – FIRST's program is incredibly hard, incredibly draining, and incredibly stressful at times. But the lessons learned are imperative – you *deal* with the stresses, the miscommunications, the conflicts. In a huge way it prepares you for a tough job many members of FIRST teams are aiming for. It teaches you to cope with difficulties graciously and professionally, and, most importantly, it teaches you to share the duct tape.