OUT THERE

In This Coliseum, Robots Fight to the Final Spark

By TODD KRIEGER

SAN FRANCISCO

WILL WRIGHT, the creator of Sim City, the classic computer game, was there. So was Mark Setrakian, a movie creature designer who worked on "Men in Black." And so was John Knoll, who flew in from Tunisia, where he is supervising special effects for the next "Star Wars" installment.

Those high-tech wizards gathered with some 70 others to enter remote-controlled, search-and-destroy machines that they built in their spare time in a raucous contest and all-round wonkfest known as Robot Wars.

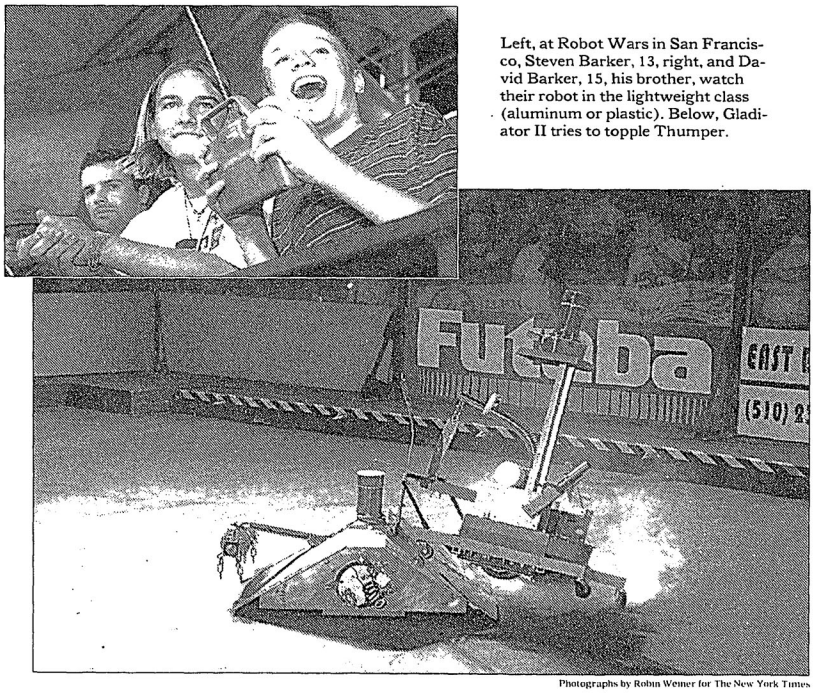
"It's the coolest all-American sporting event," said Mr. Knoll, who came with Red2, a wedge-shape robot that looks like a steel doorstop on wheels. "It's high-tech engineering combined with low-tech gladiatorial blood lust."

The two-day contest, which ended on Aug. 17, drew some 6,000 spectators to Fort Mason Center, where robots stalked one another in a hockey-rink-size arena behind a wall of bulletproof plexiglass, meant to shield onlookers from flying metal parts. As Ziggy, a robot whose main weapon was a circular saw powered by a lawn mower, cut into an opponent with a shower of sparks, spectators erupted in a frenzy. "It's the most crowd-pleasing event I've ever been to," said Dr. Moira Gunn, a host of "Tech Nation" on National Public Radio, who was a judge. "There's just nothing like it for an engineer or a technical person anywhere."

Such an event as Robot Wars, which was in its fourth year, could probably flourish only in the San Francisco Bay area, with its large and glorified technical population in computers and filmmaking.

Throughout the combat, the largely pear-shape human competitors behaved like Olympians on parade: they pumped their fists in the air, held trophies aloft and played to the multitudes by throwing team T-shirts and putting their robots through spins in the spotlight, a kind of geek touchdown dance.

Many of the most creative, and destructive machines were made by employees of the movie special-effects industry, who used company computer power and technical know-how for their projects. Mr. Knoll, who is also the creator of Photoshop, the popular image-editing software, acknowledged that he got tips from engineer buddies at Industrial Light and Magic, George Lucas's special-effects shop.



Left, at Robot Wars in San Francisco, Steven Barker, 13, right, and David Barker, 15, his brother, watch their robot in the lightweight class (aluminum or plastic). Below, Gladiator II tries to topple Thumper.

Photographs by Robin Weiner for The New York Times

Marc Thorpe, a former model maker at ILM, who started Robot Wars, said it was meant to give talented techies a more creative outlet than they often have in their day jobs. "Film is the creative playground of writers and directors," Mr. Thorpe said, "and Robot Wars allows for an autonomous creative opportunity for someone who heretofore had only filled a technical role."

A case in point was Mr. Setrakian, who designed the tiny alien-within-an-alien discovered by Linda Fiorentino during an autopsy in "Men in Black." A four-time competitor, Mr. Setrakian, whose long black hair, black fatigues and sharpened fingernails made him look every bit the mad inventor, won fame at past Robot Wars for a mighty gladiator named the Master. This time he surprised many with a wholly new creation: the Snake, which he built in just 12 days.

It has eight jointed sections, each independently controlled by Mr. Setrakian with a flexible eight-part wand shaped like the Snake. In a special demonstration not part of the combat, Mr. Setrakian, like an old-time snakecharmer, caused his machine to twist and contort. He won a special award for strangest entry.

Among the combatants, robots faced each other one on one, in classes from lightweight (made of aluminum or strong plastic) to heavyweight (steel or titanium), with the winner of each round advancing. To win a round, a robot had to render its opponent helpless, often by ramming it into the arena walls or by whacking it with weapons like whirling mini-maces or lawn-mower blades.

A robot's-eye view of the fracas was captured by a "cambot," which patrolled the arena floor, sending images to giant projection screens.

As a grand finale, there was a free-for-all of all the robots, a melee of deafening shrieks, smoke and the crowd-inspiring smell of burning oil. "Robot Wars is . . . abouuuuuuuttttt . . . deeeeeee . . . structionnnn," the announcer's voice boomed over the sound system.

In a workshop area known as the Pit, most of the excitement focused on a machine named Blendo, which was disqualified two years ago for being too destructive; after slight modifications, it was back, and its creator, Jamie Hyneman, hoped it would be able to fight all the way through its heats.

Mr. Hyneman, 40, is the founder of M5 Industries, a model-making company best known for the Little Penny doll of Nike commercials. Unfortunately for him, Blendo, which has steel blades that whir at 75 miles an hour, was once again asked to withdraw after shearing off a piece of an opponent's arm, which hurtled into the arena wall. "I have worked around robots for years, and I've never seen bulletproof plexiglass scar like that," said Dr. Gunn, who was a robotics engineer before radio.

As a consolation, Blendo was named honorary co-champion of the heavyweight class, although the real title went to a solid titanium beauty called Biohazard, which defeated an opponent named La Machine.

> Destruction is the goal, but 75 m.p.h. blades overdo it.

Blendo's withdrawal was a sad disapointment to spectators and competitiors alike, many of whom had worked through the night to prepare for a potential confrontation. "I think I could have taken him," said Donald Hutson, creator of Tazz-Bot. "I coulda been a contenda."

As much as Robot Wars was a spectacle — booming techno music, an announcer who would have been at home at a wrestling match and merchandising that would make Disney take notice — the real story was the camaraderie of the people behind the robots and their respect for one another's creations. Throughout the weekend, pockets of inventors traded engineering tips, discussed the ins and outs of radio frequencies and consulted on materials.

The spirit was best embodied by Mike Regan, whose Vicious 1 captured the lightweight championship after the Alexander, sponsored by Sony and made by Dan Danknick, withdrew without a fight.

"It really was a hollow victory," Mr. Regan said, seeming to be on the verge of tears. "I couldn't have done it without the help of Dan Danknick. I mean, he helped me fix my engine right before I'm supposed to go up against him. It's just too incredible — without him, I wouldn't have even gotten to compete."