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10th Annual Pumpkin Launch tosses campus into autumn

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One of Illinois Tech's most beloved traditions is the annual Pumpkin Launch event hosted each October by IIT's Biomedical Engineering Society (BMES). In order to compete in Pumpkin Launch, teams of students across a variety of disciplines build machines that throw pumpkins across our university's baseball field. This event attracts hundreds of spectators, including IIT students, family members, staff, faculty, and alumni, as well as members of the local community and media, to Ed Glancy Field each year.

This year's Pumpkin Launch was held on Saturday, October 18, but preparations for the event began long before then. The seven teams that competed in Pumpkin Launch have devoted countless hours over the past few weeks in order to build their pumpkin-throwing machines.

Each of the launchers designed for the competition had to adhere to a variety of rules set forth by BMES and others overseeing the competition. Each device had to have been built solely by currently registered Illinois Institute of Technology, VanderCook, and/or Shimer students. In the past, teams comprised of IIT alumni have competed, which is also permitted. The launchers had maximum total height limits and height limits for any counterweight used to launch the pumpkin, as well as limits on the types of propulsion that could be used.

Several safety regulations were also included as rules to the competition; students had to be able to operate their device from a safe distance as well as wear any necessary protective eyewear while launching. The launchers were also inspected prior to launching by safety inspectors. Additionally, in order to help offset the costs of building a pumpkin launcher and allow more students and teams to participate, teams were each reimbursed \$250 for materials required to build the team's launcher.

Three different types of awards were

up for grabs at this year's launch. The distance and accuracy competition have been a part of IIT's pumpkin launch for several years. Teams win the distance competition by launching the pumpkin furthest and win the accuracy competition by being able to most accurately guess the distance of their launches. For each of these contests, a first, second, and third place prize is awarded, each with a prize money award of \$200, \$150, and \$100, respectively, in the form of TechCash.

A third award, the Crowd Favorite award, returned after its debut last year. Before the launch, spectators of the event had the opportunity to view each launcher and vote for their favorite; the team with the most votes wins this award.

The competition was also one of several events that are a part of the Office of Campus Life's IIT Family Weekend, which takes place each fall. According to the office, Family Weekend is a time for the entire extended IIT community to partake in the school spirit that our students experience throughout the academic year. The event was also a Freshman 15 event, one of a collection of events that the Office of Campus Life encourages all first-year students to attend.

Friday night before the competition began, several teams were busy at work putting the finishing touches on their launchers. Many teams moved their launchers to the baseball field to save time in the morning as well as try to get a bit of last-minute testing in. Unfortunately, poor weather plagued teams who worked late into the night; colder temperatures, isolated rain showers, and high winds made working difficult. A few students were undeterred and worked all through the night, facing the elements, to ensure a successful launch in the morning.

Early in the morning on Saturday, October 18, the weather had improved some, allowing all teams to get to work. By 11 a.m., each of the seven launchers had lined up along the baselines of Ed Glancy Field. The types of devices at this year's launch varied slightly more than previous

years; varieties of launchers included a spinning launcher as well as some less-common types of trebuchets.

Even before the competition began, several activities were underway to entertain spectators. Several pumpkins were available for those who wanted to try their hand at carving a masterpiece, and many food trucks had arrived at the event so spectators could grab a quick bite to eat.

The competition kicked off at 1 p.m. to a slow start. Several launchers faced problems when it was time for them to throw their first pumpkin. The first forward launch came from one of the teams set up along the third base line, Skull Crushers, a team comprised of several students from the Phi Kappa Sigma Fraternity on campus. After this first launch, pumpkins began to move quickly—both in intended and unintended directions.

The competition was emceed by Katherine Stetz, IIT's Dean of Students, who kept up a light mood at the competition even as some teams were plagued with technical difficulties.

One of the most impressive launches of the event came from the second-round launch of team Mach 2, comprised of students from Illinois Tech Robotics (ITR), a student organization on campus. Their launcher spun its rotating arm up to a speed that was able to throw their pumpkin hurling through the air toward the fence on the other side of the field.

As the day wore on, several devices suffered irreparable damage that made them unable to launch again. Some teams, such as the team comprised of students from IIT's Society of Physics Students, met their end on their first launch; their floating arm launcher suffered a bent axle after their first attempt, leaving their pumpkin on the ground and their launcher unable to throw again. Moving Parts, a team who had built a King Arthur trebuchet, also suffered competition-ending damage following their second official launch, but not before throwing a few pumpkins an impressive

distance.

As launches went on throughout the day, several members of local media also took note of the event, including reporters and photographers from the Chicago Tribune as well as reporters from CBS Chicago.

A few special final launches closed out the competition. First, a pumpkin that was carved to be able to encase a GoPro camera was loaded into the Skull Crushers' launcher and thrown into the air, capturing some fun first-person footage of the event. The last launch of the event was loaded into ITR's Mach 2 launcher by IIT's very own President Anderson.

After the three official rounds of launches, the prize winners were announced on the baseball field. The first place winner for the distance competition was ITR's Mach 2 with a distance of 290 feet. The second place distance winner, with a distance of 173 feet, was Phi Kappa Sigma's Skull Crushers team. Third place went to Moving Parts with a distance of 161 feet.

These three teams were also those who won awards for the accuracy competition. The most accurate distance estimate was made by Skull Crushers, who estimated their launcher to reach 175 feet and had an actual distance of 173 feet. Second place for accuracy went to Mach 2, and third place accuracy went to Moving Parts. The Crowd Favorite award went home with Mach 2.

Even though this year's Pumpkin Launch had fewer launchers than those of previous years, the competition was still impressive and full of many impressive feats of engineering, as well as a few fun blunders. Many thanks go out to the three professors who were advisors and safety inspectors for the event: Professor Matthew Spenko, Professor Carlo Segre, and Professor Derek Kamper. Pumpkin Launch is always an exciting event that is sure to remain a staple of IIT tradition for years to come.



Photos by Kori Bowns and Kevin Zheng
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