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Illinois Tech Robotics, Society of Physics Students take home top prizes at 11th annual BMES Pumpkin Launch

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Illinois Tech's Pumpkin Launch, hosted for the past 11 years by IIT's Biomedical Engineering Society (BMES) student organization, is a popular event that 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. 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 year's Pumpkin Launch event took place on Saturday, October 17.

Each launcher designed for the competition had to adhere to a variety of rules set forth by BMES and others overseeing the competition. 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 and the launchers were inspected prior to launching by two faculty advisors for the event, Professor Carlo Segre and Professor Derek Kamper.

After weeks of preparing, five launchers lined up along the first baseline of Ed Glancy Field on Saturday morning, all hoping to take home some of the prizes offered by BMES. Three different types of awards were

up for grabs at this year's launch. The distance and accuracy competitions 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. A third award, the Crowd Favorite award, returned for a third year after its debut in the 2013 Pumpkin Launch. During the event, spectators voted on their favorite launcher, and the launcher with the most votes was the winner.

The competition was also one of several events that are a part of the Office of Campus Life's IIT Family Weekend as well as a Freshman 15 event, one of a collection of events that the Office of Campus Life encourages all first-year students to attend.

Early on Saturday morning, the five launchers were in place and teams were working on some finishing touches and last-minute testing. Before the competition began, several activities were underway to entertain spectators. IIT's Residence Hall Association hosted pumpkin carving, and many food trucks had arrived to campus so spectators could grab lunch prior to the event.

The five teams that competed in this year's event each designed a different type of machine aiming to launch pumpkins as far as possible across the baseball field. The first team stationed on the first baseline was a team comprised primarily of IIT alumni, calling their team "Meow" and their launcher the "Kitty Cat-apult," a floating axel King Arthur trebuchet. The next team was a collection of

students from IIT's Society of Physics Students organization, their launcher was powered by a collection of 12 large springs and named "Celebratory Gourd Relocation Engine," shortened CeGRE, alluding to the student organization's advisor, Professor Carlo Segre. Phi Kappa Sigma fraternity was the next launcher up the first baseline; their trebuchet Skullcrusher III was an adaptation of their machine that won second place for distance last year. The last two launchers on the field were built by student organization Illinois Tech Robotics (ITR). Their first launcher was an onager, a type of catapult that uses twisted rope to store energy for launching the pumpkin. Their second launcher, Mach III, was the third iteration of a powered rotating arm launcher that won the organization first place in accuracy at the 2013 competition and first place in distance at the 2014 competition.

At 1 p.m., the launches began. This year, the pumpkins being launched were spray painted pink by students from Colleges Against Cancer to promote awareness for breast cancer research. Each team got three official launches to try to throw their pumpkins as far and as close to their estimates as possible.

At the conclusion of the launches, ITR's Mach III was the distance winner, with a furthest launch distance of 227 feet. The second and third place winners went to ITR's Onager and alumni team Meow with distances of 65 feet and 43 feet respectively.

The first place accuracy award went to Society of Physics Students' CeGRE; the organization estimated that they would launch

seven feet and one of their launches met this estimate perfectly. The second place award went to ITR's Onager; the students on the team estimated they would launch 25 feet, and one of their launches reached 11 feet, a difference of 14 feet. ITR's Mach III won the third place accuracy award. The team estimated a launch distance of 300 feet, and their furthest launch of 227 feet resulted in a difference of 73 feet.

Lastly, the Crowd Favorite award went to alumni team Meow. With a smaller number of launchers than usual, this year's pumpkin launch event was still very successful. The small number of launchers resulted in a better viewing experience for spectators, who were able to line up along the third baseline instead of their view being blocked by additional launchers like in previous years. The launchers involved in this year's competitions were also varied and creative, each launcher had a very different design and only two of the five launchers were the traditional trebuchet usually seen at pumpkin launch.

The event concluded with University President Alan Cramb loading a final pumpkin into Mach III, which slipped through the machine's holding mechanism and spectacularly flew backwards nearly 200 feet as the launcher gained speed in preparation for launch. After a few additional exhibition launches, high school students invited to the event by BMES met with members of ITR to discuss the physics and engineering behind building the launching machines.



Photos by Kevin Zheng