



Ford/AAA Student Auto Skills Winners: Learning More than Just Auto Tech

By Tim Thornberry

Kentucky's 2013 Ford/AAA Student Auto Skills Competition brought 20 of the brightest automotive technology students in the state together to compete for scholarships and a chance to represent their schools and state in the national contest this summer at Ford World Headquarters in Dearborn, Michigan.

The 10 two-person teams won the honor of competing after scoring the highest on a comprehensive written exam provided by the National Ford/AAA Student Auto Skills organization.

"This year, more than 13,000 students from across the U.S. have and are competing for the chance to represent their school in the national finals," said David Bennett, AAA Manager of Automotive Programs. "We are proud to be offering millions in scholarships and prizes to students interested in pursuing careers as automotive service technicians."

Christopher Oakford, a spokesman with AAA in Lexington, said the competition is a wonderful opportunity for students to pursue a career in the automotive industry through the scholarships made available to competitors.

"It means a great deal to us and to the students who are the best in the state of Kentucky. They've done very well to get to the finals. We've been working with Ford for many years to sponsor this competition. I think it can clearly lead to a great career in the auto industry," he said.

Nationwide, the competition's scholarships total approximately \$11 million.



Ten two-person teams came from schools across the state to participate in the Ford/AAA Student Auto Skills Competition.

James McNiff, a field service engineer with Ford Motor Company, was on hand for the state finals. He said he has seen many good technicians come out of the competition.

"For the students, this competition means a lot as far as the scholarships from the Ford ASSET (Automotive Student Service Educational Training) program. It gives them an opportunity to enter this field as a career and really get some good training and experience working at a Ford dealership at the same time," he said.

ASSET is a 24-month associate degree program where students alternate between the classroom and work at their sponsoring Ford or Lincoln deal-

erships. Studies include academics and Ford-developed automotive technology curriculum, according to Ford.

The Kentucky Winners

The team from Lee County took top honors at this year's competition. Corey Lykins and Bradley Creech, under the direction of Automotive Technology Instructor John Lucas, corrected planted (bugs) in a new Ford Fusion in the fastest time with the fewest mistakes. In fact, the Lee County team had a perfect car.

Lucas said a nearby dealership loaned the school a practice vehicle to help the students prepare for the competition.

"There was no time limit on the car, although we only had it for a week. We are so rural in Lee County, the nearest dealer is about 35 miles away, but when I called Ronnie Thomas at Madison County Ford, there was no hesitation," he said.

Lucas emphasized the need for programs such as his to have good relationships with business and industry partners. After all, he said, his students will one day be their workforce.

Lykins said he was nervous when he found out he would be in the competition.

"After we got to practice and I got to know the car better, I started to gain more confidence," he said.

Creech said he has been in an auto garage since he was 3 years old, so it was an easy choice to take the automotive technology class at the area



Corey Lykins, left and Bradley Creech prepare their equipment for the competition.

technology center (ATC).

"I would someday like to build motors for race cars, maybe NASCAR," he said.

Considering how technically complicated racing engines are, Creech has set a lofty goal for himself, but Lucas said students need to be challenged more in the classroom and, more often than not, those students step up and meet those challenges.

Lucas said technicians have to be able to interpret data from computerized scanning equipment before repairing modern cars.

"Once these students learn how to read the data and understand what it means, they are able to determine what is going on in the vehicle, much like a doctor can read an EKG and know more about

what is going on with a patient's heart," he said.

Lucas uses a bit of old school technology when he teaches his students to determine what else could be wrong: the fundamentals.

"Once you have determined the root of the problem, it is easier to identify and repair other problems," he said.

While automobiles today are as complex as space rockets, Lucas emphasized that people still have big misconceptions about the education it takes to properly repair and maintain these vehicles.



Highest exam score winner - Wayne County ATC



Second place winning team - Grant County CTC



Third place winner - Hughes Jones Harrodsburg ATC.

“We’re still changing retro feelings about these programs,” he said.

Lee County ATC Principal Craig Herald said a quality program is needed to change those perceptions, and that is just what Lucas has.

“For years we have spent time talking about the academic aspect of CTE programs. If it is a quality program, those just show up. The academics will be a part of that program,” he said.

Herald also said that many think of CTE as an alternative to college. He said the opposite is true about his school, as most of his students will go to college.

“We have more students at the ATC that have met their college- and career-readiness benchmarks than at the high school,” he said.

Herald said Lucas doesn’t set out to teach in a different way to meet an academic standard but teaches to meet the needs of students first and meeting standards naturally follows. He also said that Lucas makes sure his students know what those benchmarks are and helps them achieve them in the event college is what a student wants.

Lykins and Creech have used their experiences at the ATC to enhance their studies in other classes.

Lykins is a graduating senior who finished in the top five academically in his class and is likely going to college on an engineering scholarship. But the engineering scholarship is just one of many choices for him.

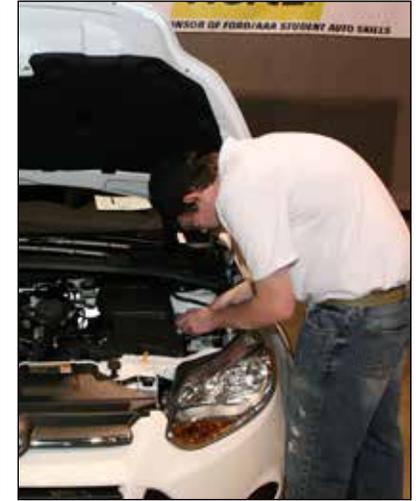
“I like the diagnostic side of this class and problem solving, and that really is part of what an engineer does, only solving problems before you get started on a project,” he said. “Learning to problem solve in this class has helped me in my other classes.”

Creech, a top junior in his class, said he likes the programs at the ATC because he feels like he is learning something he can use in his future.

“There are more hands-on skills needed by million-dollar companies than those that want to know how good your test skills are,” he said.

In winning the Ford AAA competition, the two students have won access to nearly \$100,000 in scholarships from multiple institutions. Lucas said his classroom is all about giving students such opportunities.

“I think that if your program is doing the best it can do and the overall scope as far as the best interest of your program is focused on your students, and you have placed them academically and technically in a position where they can obtain money to go to school at the postsecondary level or the military, we’re doing what’s been asked of us to do,” he said.



The new Ford Fusions used in the competition were all “bugged” with identical problems. It was the job of the students to go over their cars completely to find all the problems and make repairs, in the fastest time.

The team from Lee County ATC finished in 6th place at the National Ford/AAA Auto Skills Competition.