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News

Jack Lavelle and Jake Bechtel prepare to race their vehicle. (West Life photos by Larry Bennet)

New course record set in Parkside solar car races

By Kevin Kelley
Westlake
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Cars that run only on energy from the sun may be decades away for most of us. But they are a reality for sixth-grade students at Parkside Intermediate School.

The bad news is that the solar cars are smaller than a shoebox and don't carry any passengers.

As part of the U.S. Department of Energy's Junior Solar Sprint program, the sixth-graders designed and built solar-powered vehicles and raced them on a 20-meter course May 29.

"The General Lee," the winning car built by Patrick Evans and Ryan Thaxton, set a new course record of 8.06 seconds.

JaTeacher John Gast with solar car race winners Patrick Evans and Ryan Thaxton.

What made their vehicle the best?

"It was light," said Thaxton, who also has practice making cars in Scouting's pinewood derby. "We worked really hard on it."

The duo originally thought about using balsa wood for the frame, but decided to go with carbon fiber because it was stronger and lighter.

Evans said the two studied winners from previous contests on the schools' Web site.

All studnets get the same motor and solar panel. It's up to the teams of two to come up with the body and design.

Westlake Police Officer Scott Fortkamp checks for excessive speed on the course with his radar gun. (West Life photos by Larry Bennet)

Kurt Thonnings, the district's technology coordinator and manager of the race, said this year the contest was open to all 330 Parkside sixth-graders, up from 160 last year. That meant three new teachers participated, he said.

But the winning students this year again were taught by John Gast, who Thonnings said is very competitive when it comes to the solar car races.

Another new addition this year was an alternative energy fair. Engineers from NASA's Glenn Research Center displayed models of fuel cell engines and Sterling engines, which create energy based on differences in temperature.

Scott Winograd, an intern with Green Energy Ohio, answered student questions about solar and wind power. The organization also had a display of a water pump powered by solar energy.

More information about the Junior Solar Sprint competition can be found by pointing your Web browser to www.nrel.gov/education/jss_hfc.html.