

The firsts at the Career Technology Center continue to fly by James Perkins.

That's OK because in just about four months the engineering instructor has learned how to adapt. In the second week of August, his students earned their first chance to operate indoor drones. Last weekend, Perkins took 12 students to their first robotics competition. On Saturday, Perkins will take 12 students to their first drone tournament in Jackson.

"I am excited because I don't know what to expect," said Perkins, who has been in education for 26 years. "We have the hula hoops up on the wall in the classroom and in the hallways, and we make them land and takeoff, but there is so much to it that I am eager to see the students apply what they have learned."

The event will feature teams of two students that will participate in six qualifying matches. One student will operate the drone while the other, a spotter, will help their teammate navigate when the drone is out of eyesight.

Nolan Clark, a sophomore at Caledonia High School, and Tristan Mitchell, another sophomore at Caledonia High, will take part in the tournament. This is their first year taking classes at the CTC.

Clark said he always has been interested in engineering thanks in part to his father, who is an engineer and worked at NASA for a while. He said he has enjoyed his initial exposure to the world of engineering, robotics and drones.

"It was interesting to see peoples' different robots and ideas last weekend," Clark said. "It was nice learning what other people have done and growing as an engineer. Like my dad said, all you do is steal other peoples' ideas and improve on them."

Mitchell said he isn't sure how many times he will serve as operator of the drone for his team Saturday. Regardless of which role he plays, he is looking forward to competing against other teams and testing his skills, especially after he said the teams did better than expected last week.

"It's very hard to fly a drone," Mitchell said. "It takes a lot of practice. You have a controller and three different speeds. We usually do speed two to go through hula hoops because it isn't too fast and it isn't too slow. For landing, we use speed one.

"It is very tricky and sensitive. If you get too close to the ceiling, you get stuck up there. If another drone comes up above you, it will wobble it a lot, so you have to be very gentle with it."

Mitchell said repetition is the key to getting a "feel" for operating the control panel. He smiled when he recalled some of the first attempts as "drivers" when he and his classmates crashed the drones and pieces were flying all over the place.

Only a few months later, Perkins said it is rewarding to see how much his students' ability to operate the drones has improved. He laughed when he related a story from August when the students unpacked the drones from their boxes. Perkins said one student told him, "This is the best day of my whole school career ever."

Perkins said the first students to operate the drones tried to fly them on the highest speed, which led to a lot of crashes. Now, though, he said his students have developed a feel for the different speeds, so he is looking forward to seeing how they do in their first competition.

"They're excited," Perkins said. "I am very blessed. I love coming to work every day. It is a great group of students that I teach and work with. They are very competitive. You might not think so, but they are very competitive."

Perkins encourages any individuals or businesses that would like to support the students' work on and study of robotics and drones to contact CTC Director Susan McClelland at susan.mcclelland@lowndes.k12.ms.us.