

Jay Sanders and Noah Roberts aren't nervous about what's in store for them and their teammate, Nolan Clark.

On Friday and Saturday, though, Sanders admits the adrenaline might be pumping a little faster and the nerves may creep in.

In a season of firsts for drones at the Lowndes County School District's Career Technology Center, Sanders, Roberts and Clark will add to that growing list when they compete in the Southeast Aerial Drone Championship on Friday and Saturday at the Mississippi Coliseum in Jackson.

Teams from Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia also will compete at the Mississippi Coliseum, whose nickname is the "Big House."

"This is a huge step for us," said Roberts, a senior at New Hope High School who is in his second year at the CTC. "This is our first time doing drones, too, so this is crazy. Since we are doing so good it is unimaginable and unbelievable that we have done it."

On Friday, teams will compete in qualifying matches. On Saturday, there will be will be skills competition for autonomous, which is programming, and elimination matches and finals.

Sanders and Roberts will serve as operators, or drivers, of the drones, while Clark will work as a look out, or his team's eyes when the operator can't see and he has to navigate through a set of obstacles.

Sanders said he never imagined he would be involved in something like the Southeast Aerial Drone Championship. He said he enjoyed learning about robotics last year and moving to drones this year. Sanders said things have gotten easier for him since the start of the school year in part because operating drones is built on routines.

“This has been very fun, and I would like to keep going with this in my future,” said Sanders, a junior at West Lowndes High who is in his second year at the CTC. “Drones have been what I expected and a little bit more, taking what I learned about coding in this class and applying it here with autonomous and the general drone skills.”

Roberts had experience with bigger drones before the 2023-24 school year started. The drones the students operate at the CTC are smaller, but Roberts said the work has been so much more than he expected.

“It is so complex,” said Roberts, who will study software development at East Mississippi Community College. “You really have to focus on that one thing because if you don’t it is just going to mess you up.”

CTC engineering instructor James Perkins has been in education for more than 25 years. He is excited about the progress his students have made since the beginning of the school year. Perkins admits it took the students a few tournaments to figure out what they needed to do and how they needed to do it and that they have finished strong in their last three or four events.

“I have a great group of young men on my team,” Perkins said. “I am proud to have them on my team, and I am looking forward to this weekend.”

Perkins hopes an opportunity to participate in such a big event in one of the state’s largest venues motivates even more students to get involved with drones at the CTC.

“If we do real well, we can qualify for nationals and go to the next level,” Perkins said. “This is a great opportunity. There has been a learning curve in our first year. Now we know what it takes, so we look to be even better next year.”

Clark, a sophomore at Caledonia High, said working and competing with drones has helped him learn how to adapt to different situations. He anticipates having to use that skill this weekend in a setting where he and his teammates will be able to pick up new strategies and techniques. As a look out for the driver of the drone, Clark said he will try to put himself in Sanders' or Roberts' shoes so the team does well.

"I will fit in wherever I am needed," Clark said. "That is what every good player does on a team, fits in where he needs to be.

"We're going to try to do our best and go home happy. This is our first year doing drones and it could be multiple years for some of the other teams at the event. I am eager to see how far we can go."