

Competition Is a Family Affair

Tulsa Welding School's welding contest serves as a recruiting tool and as an orientation for students and their families

BY MARY RUTH JOHNSEN

At first glance, the high school welding contests at the Tulsa Welding School (TWS) campuses in Tulsa, Okla., and Jacksonville, Fla., look like any other welding competition around the country.



Fig. 1 — Contestants and family members alike tried out their welding skills on Lincoln Electric's virtual welding system. The virtual trainer drew a crowd throughout the day at both campuses.

There's a bunch of nervous, yet eager, students hoping to prove their skills, a set of blueprints and weld procedures for them to follow, inspectors ready to examine the weldments, and prizes ready to be awarded to the top finishers. What sets the contests apart is the large number of family members present (Fig. 1) and the welding-related and orientation activities the school sets up for them, which creates a festive atmosphere.

Tulsa Welding School's sixth annual high school competition, which took place February 20 in Tulsa and February 27 in Jacksonville, drew 198 welders from 14 states in Oklahoma, and 147 contestants from 6 states in Florida. Including family members, instructors, staff, and vendors/exhibitors, there were more than 800 in attendance in Oklahoma and more than 600 in Florida. The *Welding Journal* attended the competition at the Florida campus, but the schedule and activities related to the competition are similar at both facilities.

The purpose of the competitions is to recruit students to attend Tulsa Welding School and to orient students and their families to the school and the area, explained Lawrence Brown, president and CEO. It's a full day that includes tours of the facilities; exhibits and demonstrations by welding equipment manufacturers, prospective employers, and firms that provide student services such as housing; talks on financial aid, admissions, and availability of part-time jobs; and opportunities for parents and other family members to try welding and cutting for themselves.



Fig. 2 — Anthony Huthmacher, a student at Howson County Career Center, Warner Robbins, Ga., utilizing his practice time before the start of the competition.

"I understand now why my son is so passionate about welding," explained Dixie Malach. She tried plasma arc cutting, shielded metal arc welding, and the virtual welding trainer The Lincoln Electric Co. demonstrated throughout the day. "I love it (welding)," she said. "It's very cool, and I've got the pieces in the car to prove it."

Malach attended the contest with her father, Philip Malach, and her son, Johnathan Malach, a welding student from William Blount High School in Maryville, Tenn.

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Fig. 3 — Lyndsi Tingle was one of six students from Franklin County Career & Technical Center, Franklin, Ky., who participated in the contest. Her fellow students said Tingle was instrumental in them deciding to enroll at TWS because of the research she did on the school. Tingle hopes to someday enter the weld inspection field.



Fig. 4 — John Grace (center) came out of retirement to help his former students at Dothan Technology Center, Dothan, Ala., prepare for the contest. With Grace are Justin Fuqua (left) and Demetrius Boykin. A third student, Tyler Cline, was competing at the time this photo was taken.

“I never thought he’d go blue collar,” Malach said. “I thought he’d go to a more traditional school. But I have also never known a 17 year old who could be so determined. He started welding and said, ‘This is what I want to do for the rest of my life.’” By the end of the day, the Malachs had signed Johnathan up to attend TWS.

What Was on the Line

The timed contest consisted of a shielded metal arc project requiring multiple electrodes, positions, and techniques — Fig. 2. Contestants were graded on their adherence to procedures and on the quality of their welds. A lot was at stake. Between the two campuses, more than \$200,000 worth of scholarships, cash, and prizes of welding equipment and gear were awarded, including certificates worth \$500 toward tuition given to each contestant who participated. Top prize at each campus was a full-tuition scholarship for the TWS master welder program, which is valued at \$15,500; second place received a 50% scholarship; and third place received a 25% scholarship.

Why They Came

Randy Shewmaker, welding instructor at Franklin County Career & Technical Center, a high-school vocational/technical

school in Franklin, Ky., brought six students to the competition. All six had already enrolled to start August 9 at TWS after doing some research about the school and speaking with a TWS recruiter who had visited them in Kentucky. The chance for the scholarship money was important, but so was the competition experience.

“We do a lot of competitions each year,” Shewmaker said. “We have a team that represents our school just like the basketball team or football team does. We do ten competitions a year. It’s a good way for them to show off their talent.”

When Shewmaker started at the school six years ago, the welding program had about 40 students. Nowadays, 100 to 120 students take welding each year. He credits the competition team for part of that growth. “We do recruiting, but also as notoriety of our students increases through the competition, more students have become interested. Everyone wants to be part of something successful,” Shewmaker said.

As with many athletic teams, Shewmaker started a welding booster club of parents, people from the local industry, and others interested in welding. Much of the travel expenses for the team, including the trip to Jacksonville, are funded through the booster club.

Darla Sandlin accompanied her son Evan Sandlin to the competition, as did

Brandy Shaw with her son Thomas Clay. Both young men are students of Shewmaker. “It was important for us to come,” Sandlin said. “We needed to visit the school and see the facility and the community. He seems to feel very comfortable here.” Shaw agreed, adding her son has been interested in welding ever since his grandfather first showed him how to do welding repairs around the farm at a very young age.

“The economy may have some bearing on welding, but not as much as some industries,” Sandlin said. “These kids see the possibility of working for somebody else but then, at a relatively young age, starting a business of their own.”

The six students from Franklin all signed up to live in the same student-oriented apartment complex. They expressed interest in different avenues for a welding career. Lyndsi Tingle, one of two female contestants in the Jacksonville competition, hopes to eventually enter the welding inspection field (Fig. 3); Greg Frye said he’d like to do pipe welding; and Kyle Shupert hopes to become a pipeline welder and travel around the country.

John Grace retired in July 2009 as a welding instructor at Dothan Technology Center, Dothan, Ala. — Fig 4. He came out of retirement to help three of his former students — Demetrius Boykin, Justin Fuqua, and Tyler Cline — practice for the



Fig. 5 — The top three finishers in Jacksonville were (from left) Daniel Nelms Jr., Lee County High School, Leesburg, Ga.; second place, Kyle Shupert, Franklin County Career & Technical Center, Franklin, Ky.; and third place, Eric Lamas, Warren Central High School, Bowling Green, Ky. Two weeks later, Nelms also won the Georgia state SkillsUSA competition.



Fig. 6 — Zach Settlemoir, South Tech, St. Louis, Mo., took top honors at the competition in Tulsa.

competition, and then accompanied them and some of their parents to Jacksonville.

“These are my kids,” Grace said. “I’m concerned about their future. We (practiced) on and off for about a month. They’ve been in the program (in Dothan) about three years and are advanced welders already. I just helped them brush up.”

The practice sessions were especially important because once Grace retired, the school’s welding program was closed. Fuqua said his mother was looking at apartments while the contest was taking place and that, most likely, the three Dothan students would room together once they started at Tulsa Welding School.

In explaining why he came to the contest, Boykin said, “Welding’s a passion, or why would we come all the way here?”

Joshua Tyler Beasley, a student at Blount County Career and Technical Center, Cleveland, Ala., attended the contest with parents Candy and Brian Hallmark and his siblings. Now president of his class, Beasley first became interested in welding after taking a tour of the v-tech school and in TWS after a visit from a recruiter. Beasley said he entered the contest not only for the chance at a scholarship, but for the contest experience. He had only been in one other welding con-



Fig. 7 — All four students from South Tech, St. Louis, Mo., who competed in the Tulsa competition placed in the top 25. Shown with their awards are (from left) Zach Settlemoir, first place, Paul McManus, eighth place, Dan Whitney, twenty-fifth place, and Paul Buneta, third place. Standing behind is South Tech Welding Instructor Adam Holt.



Fig. 8 — Franklin County Career & Technical Center proved to be one of the top schools competing in Jacksonville. Shown from left are Kyle Shupert, second place, Thomas Clay, sixth place, Lyndsi Tingle, tenth place, Greg Frye, twentieth place, and Evan Sandlin, twenty-first place.

test previously but had several more coming up.

“The scholarship is important because he wants to do his education on his own, but I told him not to be too nervous or put too much pressure on himself,” Candy Hallmark said. “We all came with him because we wanted to find him a place to live. We were concerned with safety.” Beasley eventually placed 13th in the competition.

And the Winners Are

The top finishers in Jacksonville were as follows: first place, Daniel Nelms Jr., Lee County High School, Leesburg, Ga.; second place, Kyle Shupert, Franklin County Career & Technical Center, Franklin, Ky.; and third place, Eric Lamas Warren Central High School, Bowling Green, Ky. — Fig. 5. The winners in Tulsa were Zach Settlement, South Tech, St. Louis, Mo., 2nd place, Dakota Moreau, Natchitoches, La., and third place, Paul Buneta, South Tech, St. Louis, Mo. — Fig. 6.

“I’m shaking right now,” Nelms said, following the announcement of his win. “When they called the second place guy, I

thought ‘Man, I didn’t get anything.’”

Nelms was accompanied by his father, Daniel Nelms Sr., and his high school instructor Ray Dell, both of whom expressed their pride and excitement about his accomplishment. Nelms also had placed first in the regional SkillsUSA competition and was preparing for the state contest. (Nelms went on to win the Georgia state SkillsUSA competition, which took place March 11–13, at the Georgia International Convention Center, Atlanta.)

Nelms said he also is enrolled at South Georgia Technical College where his instructor is Brenda Butler, and that both teachers had helped him prepare. He had entered the competition because of an interest in Tulsa Welding School and a desire to see the campus, but had questioned whether he should enroll because he thought the program might repeat much of what he learned at the technical college. Nelms Sr. said the scholarship put everything in a new light and they would have to carefully look at what was best for Daniel. (He has since enrolled at TWS.)

A couple of schools shined at the contest. All four of the students from South

Tech, St. Louis, Mo., that instructor Adam Holt brought to the Tulsa campus competition placed in the top 25. Besides achieving first- and third-place honors as mentioned previously, Paul McManus placed eighth and Dan Whitney placed twenty-fifth — Fig. 7. In Jacksonville, the students from Franklin, Ky., had similar success with five of the six students placing in the top 25 — Fig. 8.

“We have a lot of farm boys in our program,” Shewmaker said. “Most envision taking a job out of high school, but don’t envision additional training or schooling after high school. They need that extra education. If I don’t encourage that, I’m setting them up for failure.” ♦

Fast Facts about Tulsa Welding School

The stated mission of the Tulsa Welding School (TWS) is to produce “world-class welders and welding inspectors.”

The school offers the following programs:

- Master Welder — 7 months long
- Structural Welder — 3½ months long
- Welding Technology Associates Degree — 14 months long — includes seven months in the Master Welder program and then seven months of training in nondestructive testing techniques for welding quality assurance/quality control inspector (Tulsa campus only).

The majority of the training is hands on; students spend four days a week welding and one day each week in the classroom.

A new class starts every three weeks; a class graduates every three weeks.

Combined enrollment at the two campuses is 1250.

Cost for tuition, fees, and a kit of equipment is \$15,500 for the Master Welder program. Financial aid and assistance in obtaining part-time work are available.

Tuition includes a student membership in the American Welding Society.

For more information, visit www.weldingschool.com or call

(877) 935-3539 (Tulsa campus)

(866) 574-2526 (Jacksonville campus)