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The New Cool: A Visionary Teacher, His FIRST Robotics Team, and the Ultimate Battle of Smarts

Neal Bascomb

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That Monday afternoon, in high-school gyms across America, kids were battling for the only glory American culture seems to want to dispense to the young these days: *sports* glory. But at Dos Pueblos High School in Goleta, California, in a gear-cluttered classroom, a different type of "cool" was brewing. A physics teacher with a dream – the first public high-school teacher ever to win a MacArthur Genius Award -- had rounded up a band of high-I.Q. students who wanted to put their technical know-how to work. If you asked these brainiacs what the stakes were that first week of their project, they'd have told you it was all about winning a robotics competition – building the ultimate robot and prevailing in a machine-to-machine contest in front of 25,000 screaming fans at Atlanta's Georgia Dome.

But for their mentor, Amir Abo-Shaeer, much more hung in the balance.

The fact was, Amir had in mind a different vision for education, one based not on rote learning -- on absorbing facts and figures -- but on active *creation*. In his mind's eye, he saw an even more robust academy within Dos Pueblos that would make science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) *cool* again, and he knew he was poised on the edge of making that dream a reality. All he needed to get the necessary funding was one flashy win – a triumph that would firmly put his Engineering Academy at Dos Pueblos on the map. He imagined that one day there would be a nation *filled* with such academies, and a new popular veneration for STEM – a "new cool" – that would return America to its former innovative glory.

It was a dream shared by Dean Kamen, a modern-day inventing wizard – often-called "the Edison of his time" – who'd concocted the very same *FIRST* Robotics Competition that had lured the kids at Dos Pueblos. Kamen had created *FIRST* (For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology) nearly twenty years prior. And now, with a participant alumni base approaching a million strong, he felt that awareness was about to hit critical mass.

But before the Dos Pueblos D'Penguineers could do their part in bringing a new cool to America, they'd have to vanquish an intimidating lineup of "super-teams"– high-school technology goliaths that hailed from engineering hot spots such as Silicon Valley, Massachusetts' Route 128 technology corridor, and Michigan's auto-design belt. Some of these teams were so good that winning wasn't just hoped for every year, it was expected.

In *The New Cool,* Neal Bascomb manages to make even those who know little about – or are vaguely suspicious of – technology care passionately about a team of kids questing after a different kind of glory. In these kids' heartaches and headaches – and yes, high-five triumphs -- we glimpse the path not just to a new way of educating our youth but of honoring the crucial skills a society needs to prosper. A *new cool.*

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