



Welding Competition Steeped in History and Success Celebrates Its

GOLDEN ANNIVERSARY



Students, instructors, and AWS Detroit Section members are pictured at the 50th Annual AWS Detroit Section High School Welding Contest on May 12.

The 50th Annual AWS Detroit Section High School Welding Contest merges the past, present, and future of the industry

BY CINDY WEIHL

Celebrating a 50-year anniversary is a milestone for any event, but for the AWS Detroit Section High School Welding Contest (HSWC), it signified much more. When students, instructors, AWS Detroit Section members, and guests gathered for the 2023 competition at Washtenaw Community College (WCC), Ann Arbor, Mich., on May 12, they were not only making history; some of them were reliving it.

Many of the welding instructors and AWS Section leaders responsible for getting students to the competition and keeping the annual contest going for the past five decades were themselves former competitors in the very same event, and they credit the contest for kickstarting their careers and involvement in the Section.

The Beginning of a Legacy

The AWS Detroit Section was inaugurated in 1924, just five short years after AWS's founding. With a mission to advance the science, technology, and application of welding, the Society and its members were always looking for ways to support that vision. So, in 1973, Fred Ellicott, then a welding instructor at Schoolcraft College, Livonia, Mich., and a member of the Detroit Section board, joined with other like-minded volunteers to hold the first-ever AWS Detroit Section HSWC at Schoolcraft.

Every year since then, the competition has grown in size and support. Mark Rotary, a Detroit Section member and incoming Dist. 11 Director, was once a student of Ellicott's at Schoolcraft. Rotary explained that Ellicott passed away in 2020 but always remained proud of the success and growth of the competition as well as the many participants who went on to have successful welding industry careers.



50th Annual HSWC



Fig. 1 — WCC Welding and Fabrication Instructor Alex Pazkowski (far left) explained the judging criteria to the group of welding instructors serving as competition judges. Section members Wes Doneth (to the left of Pazkowski), Mark Rotary (standing, left), and Bob Wilcox (standing, right) listened in and served as advisors.

Contest Grows and Moves to a College Led by Competition Pros

In 2014, after 40 years at Schoolcraft, the contest was moved to WCC, which Detroit Section Board Member Bob Wilcox explained could easily accommodate the growing number of participants. Wilcox has been involved with the competition since 1974.

Glenn Kay II, a welding and fabrication instructor at WCC and an active member of the Detroit Section, has chaired the HSWC committee for the past ten years and welcomed the move.

Like many other instructors involved in either taking their students to the competition and/or putting on the competition, Kay is a former Detroit Section HSWC alumni, having competed and won first place in 1995. He would then go on to compete in WorldSkills in 1997, where he earned a welding medal of excellence. Two of Kay's WCC colleagues who help run the yearly competition are also former WorldSkills competitors (and were Kay's welding students at WCC). Brad Clink, welding instructor, and Alex Pazkowski, welding and fabrication instructor, were both silver medalists at the international welding competition in 2011 and 2013, respectively. At this year's competition, Pazkowski was instrumental in helping to develop the welding project, which is a smaller version of the pressure vessel SkillsUSA competitors must weld, and explained the judging criteria to the instructors evaluating and scoring the projects — Fig. 1. He also assisted in pressure testing the specimens.

This year's competition kicked off on a sunny Friday morning as a total of 66 competitors from seven schools gathered in the Larry L. Whitworth Occupational Education building at WCC. These included Flat Rock High School, Flat Rock, Mich.; Oakland Schools Technical Campus - Southeast (OSTC-SE), Royal Oak, Mich.; OSTC - Northeast (OSTC-NE), Pontiac, Mich.; Woodhaven High School, Flat Rock, Mich.; South & West Washtenaw Consortium (SWWC) — Saline High School, Saline, Mich.; Saginaw Career Complex, Saginaw, Mich.; and St. Clair County Technical Education Center (St. Clair TEC), Marysville, Mich.

Since the contest's inception, only high school seniors have been eligible to compete. This year, for the first time, the seniors were joined by 23 juniors who were invited to observe the competition and get familiar with it for next year.

Contestants and guests were welcomed to WCC by Kay, Dist. 11 Director Phillip Temple, and AWS President Dennis Eck, who made the trip to Michigan to celebrate the competition's golden anniversary.

Ready, Set, Compete

The competition consisted of three timed parts. The first was a 77-question multiple choice exam to test the students' basic knowledge of the oxyfuel welding (OFW), oxyfuel cutting (OFC), brazing, shielded metal arc welding (SMAW), gas metal arc welding (GMAW), flux cored arc welding (FCAW), and gas tungsten arc welding (GTAW) processes. The score on this test was included in the contestants' overall final score of the competition and projects — Figs. 2, 3.



Fig. 2 — Students received the instructions for the competition.



Fig. 3 — Before the start of the competition, St. Clair TEC Welding Instructor Becca Robertson (left) reviewed the project prints with three of her students.

Fig. 4 — A welding student worked on his pressure vessel.



Fig. 5 — WCC's Brad Clink (left) and Alex Pazkowski performed pressure tests on the top scoring vessels.



The second part of the competition was an aluminum project using GTAW. The project included fillet and groove welds on aluminum base material in various positions.

The third part of the contest was a multiprocess project for building a pressure vessel. It included fillet and groove welds on a $\frac{3}{8}$ -in. carbon steel base material using SMAW, GMAW, and FCAW processes in all positions — Fig. 4.

The base material, filler metal, prints, and project instructions were given to competitors on the day of the event before the start of the contest.

Students were assigned a number at the beginning of the competition, and that number was used on both the written exam and the welding projects so the participants' identities were not known by the judges. The exam portion was graded by Detroit Section volunteers, while the welding projects were evaluated and scored by each school's welding instructor.

The top six scoring vessels also had to pass a pressure test to be eligible for a top prize — Fig. 5. All students were allowed to take their projects home at the conclusion of the event.

One Generation of Welders Shapes the Next

The contest projects have changed since the event began in 1973.

"Back then, the competition was a basic plate welding test using shielded metal arc welding," recalled Glen Knight, a Detroit Section member who has been involved in coordinating the competition since 1978. "Over the years, it has become more extensive as far as the project, and when it moved to Washtenaw it became a multiprocess competition."

Knight supports the extra challenges the contest now brings because he feels they make the students more prepared for the jobs they will seek after graduation.

The instructors who bring their students to the competition couldn't agree more, especially since many of them were once Detroit HSWC participants themselves.

Steve Langdon, a welding instructor at OSTC-NE, competed in 1989 and has brought his own students to compete every year since 1998. Terry Wegienka, a welding instructor at Flat Rock High School, competed in 1993, and after embarking on his high school teaching career four years ago (after several years working in the industry), he started bringing his students two years ago.

Woodhaven High School Welding Instructor Mark Salgat didn't compete himself but has been bringing his students to participate in the contest since 1986.

The instructor believes the Detroit HSWC not only inspires high school seniors to pursue welding careers but can also earn them scholarships and introduce them to AWS, which can open many more career doors.

Langdon, the welding instructor at OSTC-NE, agreed. "I competed in 1989 and every single competition pushed me to try harder. I had no vision for my future, and welding was a turning point for me.

My own high school welding instructor inspired me, and this competition introduced me to AWS. High school is pivotal for important decisions," he said. Langdon went on to pursue a degree at Ferris State University, Big Rapids, Mich.

Robert Watson competed in the event as a senior at Flat Rock High School nine years ago. It marked the first time he had heard of AWS. Now, he's part of the executive committee that helps put on the contest.

"This competition sparked my interest in AWS," he explained. "I met the Section chair and several members, and we talked about what they did and it interested me."

After the contest, Watson went on to earn a bachelor's degree in welding engineering technology at Ferris State University, and today is not only heavily involved with AWS through the Detroit Section but also at a national level as an AWS Future Leader. The Future Leaders Program provides opportunities for early career members of the welding



Fig. 6 — The winners of the 50th Annual Detroit Section HSWC posed with their instructors, Blake Ballou (far left) and Terry Wegienka (far right).

community to interact with industry leaders and contribute to AWS at the highest level of governance. Future leaders serve up to a three-year term and can participate in AWS Board of Directors and policy-setting committee meetings, among other activities.

Multiple Pathways to Success for the Class of 2023

It was hard for the high school seniors and junior observers participating in this year's contest to not feel inspired by the welding greats around them and optimistic about their own futures in welding. During the day's events, attendees had the opportunity to listen to presentations from local representatives from The Lincoln Electric Co., Miller Electric Mfg., Royal Truck & Utility Trailer, United Technical Solutions, and Boilermakers Local 169. All of the representatives emphasized their need for welders, and Royal Truck & Utility Trailer, United Technical Solutions, and Boilermakers Local 169 came ready to recruit. The representatives spoke about their open summer internships and apprenticeships and encouraged students to speak one-on-one with them to learn more and apply.

As committee chair of the HSWC, Kay felt it was important to invite industry personnel to the event to show students that even if they don't have college plans, they can still pursue welding careers.

"This event does not just promote schools, but industry and options on entering the workforce," Kay said. "We want the seniors to know that there is not one path, but many. Perhaps college isn't for you, but you also do not have to settle for minimum wage. You have a skill and there are people here

And the Winners Are . . .

Whether it was with knowledge, new connections, or tangible prizes, none of the HSWC student attendees went home empty-handed from this year's event. Thanks to the generous donations of various companies, hundreds of prizes totaling a value of more than \$15,000 and ranging from personal protective equipment to angle grinders to welding machines were raffled off during the event.

"The focus of this competition is on the high school seniors because they're graduating, and we want them to have every opportunity to be successful on whatever path they choose," Kay explained. "If they choose to go to school, we are giving away \$9000 in scholarship money. If they choose to go into the workforce and they want more training, they can use that to go to a trade school or they can use it to take a class at a college to refine their skills. They have the gear — the jackets, the gloves, the helmets. They have the stuff to continue to move forward. That's the key; to set them up for success by giving them every tool we can."

The top five winners of the 50th Annual Detroit Section HSWC received scholarships from the Section — Fig. 6. This year's winners were as follows:

- 1 Gabe Landskroener — \$2500**
Flat Rock High School
- 2 Elliot Bell — \$2000**
SWCC
- 3 Caleb Cialkowski — \$2000**
Flat Rock High School
- 4 Mikala Sposito — \$1500**
SWCC
- 5 Isaac Kolasa — \$1000**
Flat Rock High School



Fig. 7 — AWS District Director Phillip Temple (far left) and AWS President Dennis Eck (far right) presented appreciation plaques to HSWC committee members (from left) Glen Knight and Glenn Kay II.

willing to pay you well for it. The industry needs help, and I really wanted to connect the need for skilled welders with all opportunities available to them and advise them there is not a one-size-fits-all expectation. To have them [the representatives] here and to have the AWS president come and speak with them, it's an experience they will never forget and will only inspire."

AWS President Dennis Eck spoke to the students about the importance of hard work and the power of networking regardless of whether they were pursuing further education or going straight to work. The impact of his words stuck with St. Clair TEC junior Remington Kovek.

"The opportunity to see what the contest is about and to be able to meet so many industry people here, it just really opens your eyes to see what's out there and what you need to work on. And the networking! The president [Eck] sat down and had lunch with us. That's amazing," he said.

Raising a Flag for the Future

Between the mix of Detroit Section members who have been involved with putting on the HSWC for decades, the

newer members who have previously competed and are now getting involved and trying to make it bigger and better every year, and the instructors who have competed and now bring their own students, it's clear that this annual contest is more than just a welding competition — Fig. 7. It's a testament to the passionate individuals who are dedicated to the past, present, and future of the welding industry, and for some, it's even more personal.

"I'm retired, but I've always stayed involved in the Section," Knight said. "This year, the 50th anniversary of this contest, it's my last year, my going-away year. It's time for the younger people to take over, and we have some good ones lined up. I served in the U.S. Army and was in Vietnam, and every time I see the American flag raised, I get a tingle because I'm patriotic, and when I am here every year, watching these kids assemble and make things with their hands, I get the same tingle. To me, one of the most patriotic things you can do for our country and for our future is to make things with your hands. It means so much to see these kids doing that and know they have good futures ahead." [WJ](#)

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