

From Bangladesh to Panama

In conversation with Israfil Shaheen Arannya, silver medallist at the World Robot Olympiad (WRO)

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Bangladeshi robotics team “Robonium Bangladesh” clinched the fifth position at the World Robot Olympiad (WRO) 2023 held in Panama. The young team, consisting of Israfil Shaheen Arannya, a grade 12 student at Cantonment Public School and College, Rangpur, as well as Qazi Mostahid Labib and Tafsir Tahrim, both grade 11 students at Sunnydale School, competed in the “Future Innovators (Senior)” category and bagged the 5th position, competing against 451 teams from 77 countries.

Campus sits with Arannya to learn more about his experience at the olympiad.

How does it go from being just a robotics enthusiast to navigating towards WRO?

If I talk about the WRO, it’s all about the passion and love for robotics. What you do in the WRO is learn. All of us know that to get to somewhere like the WRO is not easy, and you have to overcome a lot of obstacles. Throughout this entire process, you’ll learn a lot of things. When starting out with robotics, you’ll have to master the basics. As you make progress, you need to actively improve your skills and learn more advanced concepts. Get accustomed to working with themes as well as working with a team. Once all those boxes are checked, you’ll be heading into the nationals. After you crack the nationals, the real journey for the WRO begins.

There’s some mental pressure and the looming anxiety of whether you’ll make it to the next stage. You start to feel the pressure setting in. This is when our olympiad camps come into play. Olympiad camps gather the best roboticists and all-rounded individuals to provide training for the big event. These camps make sure that you’re pushing yourself to do your best and you know how to handle all sorts of anomalies.

You mentioned that your team faced some issues regarding sponsorship. Could you elaborate on that?

Despite its substantial growth in recent years, robotics is still very much up-and-coming in Bangladesh. For rising olympiads like the WRO, companies do not feel as compelled to sponsor us compared to some of the more established olympiads. In our case, we worked tirelessly for sponsorship, and the WRO’s governing body also lent us a hand. Despite our efforts, we were unable to land a sponsorship deal both for Panama this year, as well as last year for the WRO held in Germany. We were fortunate enough to have been able to finance ourselves, but for a lot of participants, in any olympiad, not enough sponsorship can halt their journeys.

How hard was it to balance your academics and the olympiad?

Robotics can be time-consuming. This year, my team and I were at it for over three months straight. Whilst I am from Rangpur, my other teammates were from Dhaka. So I often found myself travelling to Dhaka and missing a lot of classes.

I’m immensely grateful to my parents and family, who have supported me through every aspect of this. I think the support from my family about not having to worry about my academics for the time being really took a burden off my shoulders and helped me deliver my best.

Still, I believe balance is key to all of this. I had my SSC exams in the middle of the olympiad last year, so I had to pull through as much as I could beforehand to make up for the absence.

What do future prospects look like for a WRO medallist?

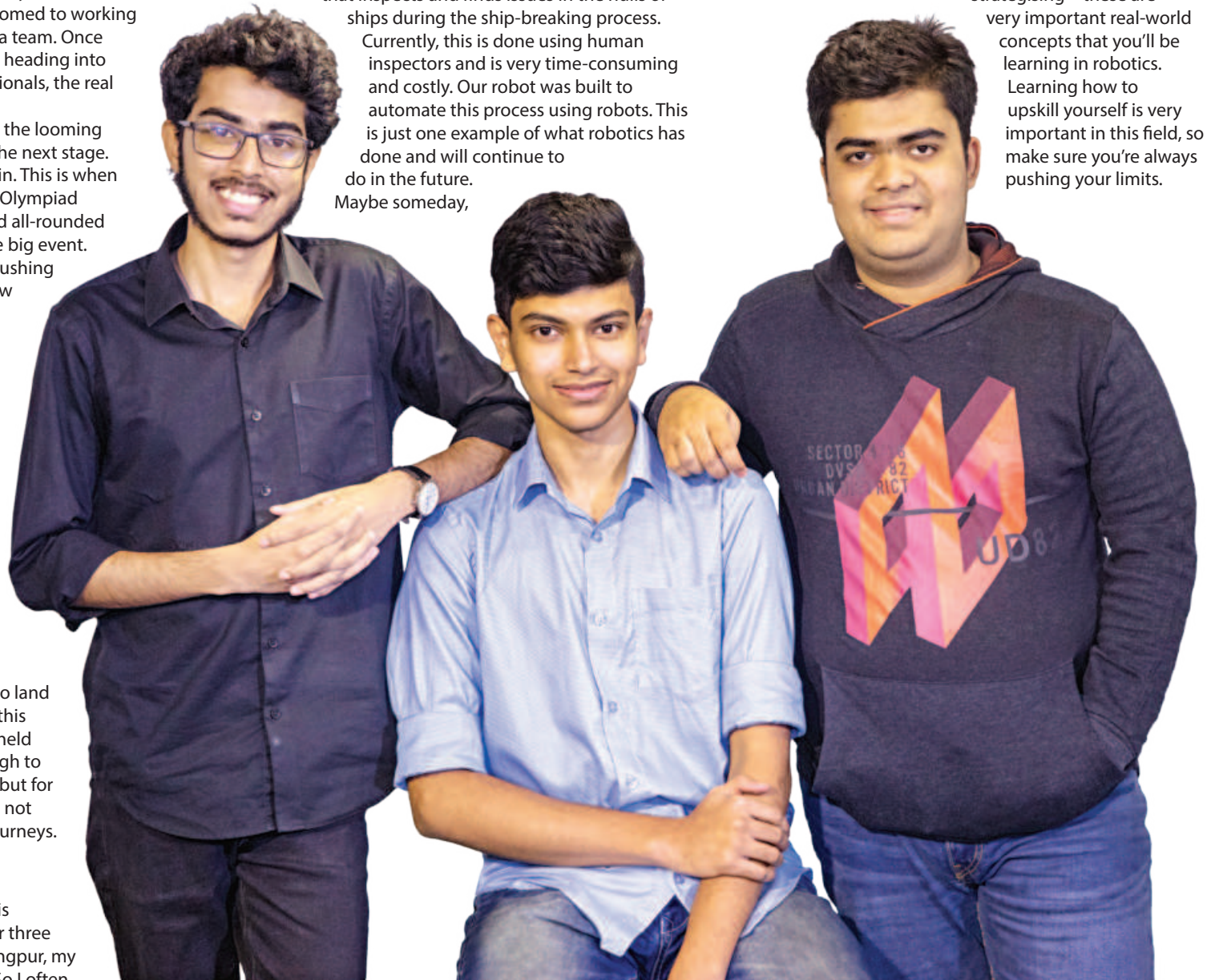
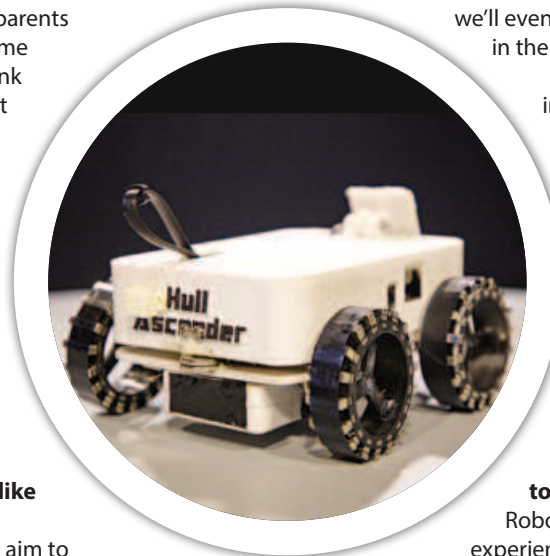
The WRO and robotics in general, aim to solve a lot of real-world issues. This year, for example, we were tasked with building a robot that inspects and finds issues in the hulls of ships during the ship-breaking process. Currently, this is done using human inspectors and is very time-consuming and costly. Our robot was built to automate this process using robots. This is just one example of what robotics has done and will continue to do in the future. Maybe someday,

we’ll even see robots inspired by our designs in the shipyards of Bangladesh.

From an individual perspective, international olympiad medals are also really lucrative during the university application process, and they can garner a lot of scholarships from reputed universities abroad. However, good scholarships or anything of the sort should not be your motivation for getting into robotics. You’ll likely end up burning yourself out if you aren’t passionate about it.

Is there anything that you’d like to say to aspiring roboticists?

Robotics is all about the learning experience. Learning how to source your materials, dealing with various types of people, managing budgets, presenting your work, and strategising – these are very important real-world concepts that you’ll be learning in robotics. Learning how to upskill yourself is very important in this field, so make sure you’re always pushing your limits.



From the left: Israfil Shaheen Arannya, Tafsir Tahrim, and Qazi Mostahid Labib.