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## **THE GOLEM GROUP**

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### **UNDERDOG TEAM EXCELS IN OFF-ROAD ROBOT CHALLENGE**

On Saturday, at the DARPA Grand Challenge for Autonomous Ground Vehicles, the fourteenth-ranked Golem robot roared to a stunning fourth-place finish, crossing five miles of rough terrain before stalling on a steep incline. By comparison, the most successful and well-funded teams traveled only seven miles, despite outspending the Golem Group by a factor of as much as a hundred to one.

The Grand Challenge, sponsored by the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, tested the ability of fully independent robots to race across the California desert. Most of the high-profile teams were affiliated with major research universities or defense contractors, with vehicle budgets approaching a million dollars or even beyond. But other teams such as the Golem Group were made up of garage tinkerers with comparatively tiny resources. Richard Mason, the leader of the Golem Group, managed to finance the \$35,000 robot with winnings from two appearances on the TV game show *Jeopardy!*

The Golem Group's astonishing performance could hardly have been predicted the day before, when the Golem robot had driven into a concrete barrier protecting spectators. Previously in the week, the wayward robot had knocked down part of a fence and clipped the side of a parked van. Its overall performance was just barely good enough to scrape into the final phase of the Grand Challenge, where it held the fourteenth pole position among fifteen finalists.

But the members of the Golem Group refused to be discouraged and worked through the night in a last-ditch effort to solve their robot's problems. Around 3:00 am on Saturday morning, the bleary-eyed programmers made the necessary breakthrough. A few hours later, the Golem robot would make its five mile run, traveling much further than most of the other robots in the competition. The team hopes that its success will attract sponsors and lead to victory in a future repeat of the Grand Challenge.

"By managing to hold our own against million-dollar competitors," said Mason, "We illustrated the basic premises behind the DARPA Grand Challenge: that the difficult problems in robotics aren't necessarily solved by spending money, and that innovation can come from all sorts of individuals and not only from large corporations and universities."