

Gould Academy Students Win NASA Rover Challenge with Perfect Run

The first-time team takes home multiple awards, including Rookie of the Year at the 2026 competition at Marshall Space Flight Center in Huntsville, AL

BETHEL, ME, UNITED STATES, April 15, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- After months of planning, designing, building, and testing, the [Gould Academy Engineering Team](#) earned first place in the remote-control high school division of NASA's 2026 Human Exploration [Rover Challenge](#) at the Marshall Space Flight Center in Huntsville, Alabama.

The teams in the remote-control division design and build rovers capable of navigating a half-mile course simulating the surface of the moon, while completing mission-specific tasks. Before arriving in Huntsville, their designs are meticulously reviewed and evaluated by NASA engineers.

“

There are so many ideas on the table, and you just brainstorm. You're not going to get this by sitting in a classroom. This is real experience.”

Ivan Prymak '26

Entering the competition was originally the idea of team leader Maria Mangino '28 of Asheville, North Carolina. She heard about the competition during a CAD internship in New York last summer.

“During my ninth-grade year at Gould, there wasn't really an engineering team,” says Maria. “And when I heard about the competition, I thought, ‘we could totally do this.’ When we got in, it didn't feel real at first.”



The Gould Engineering Team poses with their new hardware at NASA's 2026 Rover Challenge Awards Ceremony.

After a strong performance on day one of the competition and with newfound confidence,

Gould's team completed the course and all accompanying tasks to perfection, outperforming all teams at both the high school/middle school and university levels.

"Each member of the team owned their own part of the project, and they put in the hours," said Billy Ayotte, Director of the IDEAS Center at Gould and Engineering Team mentor.

"The competition wasn't just about winning for them. It was about discovering how they measured up. Once they realized they could compete and even outperform the world's top teams, it gave them a huge confidence boost. They learned that this level of work isn't done by a mythical group of geniuses. It's done by people just like them. Now they see themselves in that group."

Their success didn't end with the overall first-place finish. The first-year team took home multiple awards, including Rookie of the Year, the Task Challenge Award, the Industry STEM Engagement Award, and the Most Improved Performance Award, at an awards ceremony on Saturday night in front of 500+ competitors from 42 universities, colleges, and high schools from around the world.

After putting up the best excursion time, Maria was pretty sure they had won the division. But the team was overwhelmed with all of the accolades.

"When we won it was totally unexpected. I was so surprised and super proud of our team," she said. "This team [works] well together. Everyone has separate skills. I couldn't make great social posts like Maeve. No one could pilot better than Ivan could. I certainly couldn't have made better wheels than Ezra. Mateo did a lot of our electrical wiring. Nobody could keep us safer than Sean. All our pieces put together made it exactly what we needed."



The Gould Engineering Team poses after their first excursion at 2026 NASA's Rover Challenge.



The Gould team prepares for their first excursion at the 2026 Rover Challenge.

Ivan Prymak '26 from Dnipro, Ukraine, who pilots the rover, explains why the competition was so impactful.

“This kind of competition allows creativity and the opportunity to apply your skills and ideas in real life,” says Ivan. “There are so many ideas on the table, and you just brainstorm. You’re not going to get this by sitting in a classroom. This is real experience. Real engineers apply this kind of thinking when they’re building stuff.”

The timing of this year's event was felt particularly relevant to the students as NASA's Artemis II lunar flyby mission splashed down after day one of the competition. NASA's Rover Challenge is one of the eight Artemis Student Challenges designed to engage students in engineering projects, with the hope that many will pursue degrees and careers in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.

For Vanya, he's ready for the next project or the next competition.

“It just makes me want to do this again,” he says. “I need to start something else right now. I don't wanna lose this. It was life-changing. I'm really thankful to Gould for this opportunity. Everything fell into place, and it was magical. It showed me I can do it. It's all within reach.”

Gould's Engineering Team:

Maria Mangino '28 - Student Team Lead

Sean Xie '27 - Student Safety Officer

Maeve Grocki '27 - Director of Media & Communications

Mateo Viniegra Ocampo '26 - Head Subsystems Engineer

Ezra Tsapis '27 - Wheel Engineer

Ivan Primak '26 - Main Pilot and Electrical Systems Engineer

Sonya Merkulova '27 - Subsystems Engineer

Gould Academy Awards from NASA's 2026 Human Exploration Rover Challenge

1st Place — Remote-Control Division (Middle/High School)

Rookie of the Year

Task Challenge Award — Remote-Control (Middle/High School)

Phoenix Award — Remote-Control (Middle/High School)

Industry STEM Engagement Award — Remote-Control (Middle/High School)

Most Improved Performance Award — Remote-Control (Middle/High School)

Greg Gilman

Gould Academy

+1 207-381-0134

[email us here](#)

Visit us on social media:

[LinkedIn](#)

[Instagram](#)

[Facebook](#)

[YouTube](#)

This press release can be viewed online at: <https://www.einpresswire.com/article/905931962>

EIN Presswire's priority is source transparency. We do not allow opaque clients, and our editors try to be careful about weeding out false and misleading content. As a user, if you see something we have missed, please do bring it to our attention. Your help is welcome. EIN Presswire, Everyone's Internet News Presswire™, tries to define some of the boundaries that are reasonable in today's world. Please see our Editorial Guidelines for more information.

© 1995-2026 Newsmatics Inc. All Right Reserved.