

Computer team from UCF to go against best

Three students will compete at the International Collegiate Programming Contest.

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Connect every downtown building by a bridge. Map a path through a block of cheese using the holes. Reconstruct a jumbled crossword puzzle to isolate a word that doesn't belong.

Devise computer programs to solve all those problems and up to six other mind benders and it still doesn't describe what three University of Central Florida students face today in the Czech capital of Prague.

Casey Thurston, Raymond Ho and Scott Vogelpohl have to do it faster than 72 other top teams of programmers from all over the globe. The winners don the mantle of the world's best college computer programmers.

"The pressure is immense," said UCF coach Ali Orooji, a competition veteran and associate professor in the Department of Computer Science.

Orooji says the team's 20 daylong practice sessions, at seven-hour stints, is key to its ability to compete.

Ho, 19, of Hong Kong; Thurston, 20, of Orlando; and Vogelpohl, 22, of Jacksonville, arrived Friday in Prague for pre-competition activities at the International Collegiate Programming Contest.

Just to get invited is a tough. Tens of thousands of students from more than 1,300 schools competed in the fall to make it past regional competitions. Only 25 teams from North America made it to the finals.

"It certainly places these students among the best in the world," said Gabriel "Gabby" Silberman, a program director for IBM, the corporate sponsor of the competition.

The contest, now in its 28th year, is the Final Four for the wired set. The problems test logic, strategy, and, ultimately, endurance.

Winners earn scholarships, IBM prizes, a good look from prospective technology employers and the bragging rights that come with claiming the "world's smartest trophy," as organizers refer to it.

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