Computer team aiming for world championship

The planet's top 60 computer programming teams will be in Orlando for the international competition on March 18

A UCF team will take a home-court advantage into the mind-bending international computer programming finals on March 18 when the planet's 60 top collegiate squads vie in Orlando for bragging rights to the world title.

The team of three senior computer science majors will test their mettle in the cyberspace realm of ones and zeros against 59 other teams that earned a trip to the Association of Computing Machinery's world championship through a winnowing process that started with 2,400 teams from 69 countries. The UCF team of Ambrose Feinstein, Jonathan Kolb and Phillip Dexheimer gained its berth in the finals by finishing behind Georgia Tech in regional competition among some 70 teams from Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, Alabama and Mississippi.

The Y2K international championship will be awarded to the team that solves the most programming problems in five hours, beginning at 9:30 a.m. at the Radisson Hotel Universal Orlando, site and headquarters of the competition. The winner will be announced at a 5:30 p.m. awards ceremony there.

U.S. teams, which include squads from Harvard, MIT, Stanford, Cornell, Cal Tech and Duke, account for one-third of this year's finalists. In recent years, foreign teams have proven equal to the once dominant U.S. squads. Teams from Canada, Australia, Germany, New Zealand and the Czech Republic have won six of the 10 international championships since 1990.

UCF teams have a solid competitive history, having finished as high as second in the world over the 18 years UCF has participated in the international competition. In the Southeastern U.S. regional contests over the same period, UCF teams always have finished either first, second or third. It is an unmatched record consisting of eight first-place titles and five finishes each in second and third places.

Like intercollegiate athletes, UCF computer-team members train hard. In preparation for the annual fall regional competition, UCF teams meet 10 times in 7-hour practice sessions working on programming problems from past events. When tapped for the international finals on the strength of regional performance, the participating UCF team repeats the fall regimen.

"UCF is very fortunate to have such a talented and committed group of students," says Ali Orooji, a computer science professor who serves as team manager. "Considering what they learn and achieve, though, it is a very worthwhile investment on their parts."

He didn't have to add that graduating team members can write their own tickets in the booming information technology industry at salaries that may approach six figures.

— Dean McFall