
UCF students travel to Russia in hopes of international title

By Glenn Wolf

Contributing Writer

Published: Sunday, July 14, 2013

Updated: Sunday, July 14, 2013 15:07

Elite computer programmers from around the world traveled to Russia in order to compete in a world-renowned contest. The International Collegiate Programming Contest is considered to be one of the oldest and most prestigious programming competitions in the world. UCF's programming team has been very successful and competed the past 31 years.



Courtesy UCF Programming Team Facebook

While traveling across the globe is exhausting enough for most, the UCF team, known as UCF Phyre, which consisted of Michael Galletti, Stephen Royal and Daniel Wasserman, had to immediately prepare for the grueling competition.

UCF Programming Team known as Team Phyre competes at the International Collegiate Programming Contest in Russia.

ICPC focuses on giving each team a set of eight to 12 problems to attempt in a five-hour period. These questions vary in difficulty. The problems are modeled after real-world business scenarios and focus on participants' problem-solving skills. The team that answers the most correct questions during the allotted time, wins the title.

Galletti has been on the team the past three years and said the contest gets harder each year. Each question is extremely detailed and the trio creates a strategy to answer the easiest questions first as well as who is in charge of what.

"The contest lasted the shortest five hours of my life," Galletti, a computer science major, said.

The whole event took place over the course of three days in St. Petersburg, Russia. Participants were taken on tours of various landmarks when they weren't competing, which Galletti said was an extraordinary experience.

Volunteer coach Chris Gouge said that members put in an extensive amount of practice. In order to prepare for the competition, team members practiced for up to eight hours on 35 to 40 Saturdays of the year.

"Also, each student was expected to spend 10 to 20 hours on individual study, solving assigned problems and participating in short online contests such as TopCoder," Gouge said.

All of UCF's programming teams competed at the regional level, where a total of 8,000 teams competed. UCF Phyre was selected to travel to the World Finals. UCF Phyre solved four of the 11 problems at this year's World Finals. Gouge said that is something to be proud of.

"They were very hard problems," Gouge said. "However, we always want to do better."

ICPC brings together the top teams from universities across the world. This year, 120 teams competed and UCF finished at 48.

Ali Orooji, the team's faculty adviser, was hoping for a higher ranking.

"I personally was hoping to make top 10, but it is a five-hour contest so things don't always go according to plan," Orooji said. "I do not want to undermine the students' efforts; they did the best they could."

Overall, everyone seems pleased with the efforts of the team, and is happy that UCF continues to participate year after year.

"The world championship round is a huge accomplishment," Orooji said. "Some universities have never made it past regionals."

The team would like to bring awareness to their success over the past 30 years. Gouge said that universities tend to focus too much on sports.

"I love UCF athletics, but for academic competitions, we don't get quite the same fervor in our fans," Gouge said.

Also, Gouge went on to say it's likely the programming team will not be mentioned on a list of things that are great about UCF; however, it's starting to gain a following.

"I know a small handful of students for whom the team was a major factor in choosing a university," Gouge said. "It's having an effect, the word is getting out, but we'd definitely like it to reach more people."

While the success of the team may not be reaching all of UCF, it is gaining recognition from many large companies. These companies such as Google, Microsoft, Disney and many more are actively hiring members of the team.

Even though UCF's programming team did not place as high as they wanted to, they have won the visibility of many influential companies. The team will continue to practice intensely and travel next year and give World's another shot.

"It'll take some work, but hopefully we'll be able to fight our way to the world stage again next year and make up for it," Galletti said. "It's important to use these results as motivation."