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UCF programming team puts skills to the test in IBM contest

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Godzilla isn't the only one to make a big impact on Tokyo. This spring break, three UCF students traveled to the other side of the world to compete in IBM's International Collegiate Programming Contest, placing 44th of 1,700 teams and beating out such big-name institutions as Harvard and Vanderbilt.

This is the third consecutive year that UCF's programming team has advanced to the international competition, hosted by the world's largest computing organization, the Association for Computing Machinery.???

The team members are senior Jobby Johns, graduate student Nadeem Mohsin and senior Walter Mundt.

The UCF team practices 25 Saturdays every year - each practice lasts seven hours.? "We start with a one-hour lecture, followed by a five-hour contest, followed by a one-hour discussion on the problems in the contest," Ali Orooji, the UCF programming team adviser, said.

For the past 25 years, more than 1,700 universities have participated in the regional competitions with UCF always finishing top 3 in the Southeast Regional Contest.? "Our record is matched by no other school in our region," Orooji said.?

The top 88 schools traveled to the world championships in Tokyo. UCF was one of 20 qualifying American teams that made it to the competition.

Along with creating contacts among people in the technology field, the programming teams "spend a week with some of the most prestigious researchers in the world," said Doug Heintzman, director of Strategy for IBM's Lotus Division and Sponsorship Executive.

Mohsin, who has never before participated in the ICPC, looked forward to meeting the other competitors. "We know each other from interaction online; now we have the chance to meet in person."

The U.S. has a small percentage of teams in the competition compared with Russia and China, but UCF has been a constant presence in the competition, alongside universities such as Harvard, Duke, Virginia Tech and MIT.

Despite the prestigious company, Mohsin said he didn't feel nervous going into the competition.

"I've had so much schoolwork the past few weeks, that in comparison this contest will feel easy," he said before leaving.

Not all students shared this attitude - some were so terrified when they arrived that they insisted on being replaced by a back-up member.?

The battlefield was a large room swarming with cameras, spectators and announcers.? "The teams are sitting next to the most advanced computer scientist speculating their techniques and strategies," Heintzman said.

Johns - who insists that he is not a very interesting person - proved to be the fastest member on the team, completing his first assigned problem in only 10 minutes. "The boats arrived at one time, and cargo came in at a different time, and I had to efficiently organize the cargo to be placed on top of the boats in a correct order," Johns explained.

Along with the problems assigned by the competition, the team members also faced real-life challenges during their site-seeing trips to Shinto Temples and downtown Tokyo.

"We were almost completely illiterate," Mundt said. "When we were traveling the subways, we couldn't read the Japanese characters. The only way we knew where to go was by finding an English speaker and asking directions. Then, one of our coaches took photos of the station's characters so that we could get back to our hotel."

The contest was divided into two separate parts. The first segment involved several practice rounds and friendly contests. Last year, the teams used their programming skills to create space ship battle projected across a planetarium ceiling.

The second segment compacted a semester's worth of curriculum into a grueling competition. Teams were given five hours to complete up to 10 problems ranging in levels of difficulty.

"There is at least one problem that everyone in the room can solve, and one problem that only two people on the planet can solve," Heintzman said. "These students are trying their skills against the very best."

Mundt, the longest-standing team member, attributes the start of the competition as one of the reasons he's been involved with the programming team for so long. "You enter into the competition with an open mind that stores a library of techniques. When you open up the problems, you have to choose which pieces of that library you can use and what knowledge is necessary to solve the problem."

As the five hours progressed, colored balloons, representing the problems assigned, were hung from teams' workspaces to signal which problems were completed.

"It's a room full of people thinking hard and working hard, and all you hear is mumbling and typing," Mundt said. "The experience is intense. You can't concentrate on anything else but the problem at hand, trying to figure out what to do to move the problem one step closer to completion."

The UCF computer programming team tied with Carnegie Mellon, Cornell and Duke, and placed ahead of Harvard, Northwestern and Vanderbilt.

"I feel pretty decent; we scored in the top half of a competition that involves over 1,700 teams," Mundt said. "We really didn't do badly at all in that company."

Winners of the competition are awarded scholarships and prizes from IBM - and possibly an offer for a position with the company. Some current employees at IBM were past competition competitors.

As the official sponsor of the event since 1997, the competition is a large and significant investment for IBM. Along with funding, IBM also provides technical expertise, organizational and logistical support, and the hardware and software that the students use.

The company's leaders focus on the importance of providing a platform for and highlighting the best and brightest future leaders of technology. Heintzman said, "These students will be the ones solving the planet's biggest problems - AIDS, global warming, economic prosperity. It's important to promote excellence."

The nine-hour time difference "honestly didn't affect me as much as I thought it would," Mundt said. "Our days were so full of activity that, no matter what time it was, we were ready for sleep. Coming back, my days aren't

quite so active - I'm at a desk again instead of walking around Tokyo."

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