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UCF team wins Battle of the Brains

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A UCF programming team will go to an international competition after placing first in the IBM-sponsored "Battle of the Brains" regional competition at Florida Institute of Technology.

Team "UCF Hypersolution" placed first among 65 teams in the southeast region of the United States on Oct. 25, securing themselves a spot as one of the 100 universities to compete in world finals in Stockholm, Sweden, in April. The four other UCF teams placed among the Top 10 in the region.

"For 26 years, we have always finished in the top 3 in the Southeast Regional Contest," team faculty adviser Dr. Ali Orooji said in an e-mail message. "Our record is matched by no other school in our region."

The 33rd annual Association for Computing Machinery International Collegiate Programming Contest pits teams composed of three university students against each other in a five-hour competition to solve a set of complex problems with computer programming.

The team that solves the most problems before the deadline wins the contest. At Florida Tech, UCF Hypersolution won by solving five out of 10 problems. Most teams solved three or four problems, and the point structure placed UCF Hypersolution ahead of other teams that solved five problems.

UCF Hypersolution consists of veteran UCF programmers who have been competing in the Battle of the Brains for more than three years. The team consists of programmers Stephen Fulwider, Jeremy Elbourn, Michael Do and coach Chris Gouge. Fulwider and Elbourn were both on the UCF team that competed in last year's world finals in Alberta, Canada, where it received an honorable mention.

UCF's team will be one of the 100 teams chosen from more than 2,000 universities from 83 countries to go to the world finals.

In previous World Finals, UCF has placed as high as second, fourth, and fifth, placing them as one of the top 1 percent of competing universities in the world, Orooji said.

"UCF has been remarkable. They're right up there with the elite schools in the nation," IBM Sponsorship Executive Doug Heintzman said.

Since the beginning of the fall semester, the team has been doing 5-hour practices and 3-hour lectures every Saturday to prepare for the competition. Every weeknight, they would do a 2-hour online training session, Elbourn said.

With all the preparation, they are still able to balance school and work along with the competition. But whatever happens in April, if the team doesn't come home with any awards or bragging rights, they will still have the programming competition experience that a number of job employers are looking for. The experience shows that a

person can deliver a program, under pressure, that works according to specifications, Gouge said.

"That is one thing that people fresh out of computer science school can't do, because they don't have the actual experience to do it," Gouge said. "These guys are very proficient at making the programs work the first time, and that's a very valuable skill to have in the job market."

The ACM-ICPC World Finals is essentially a large recruiting pool of young innovative programmers, Heintzman said.

"Bright, innovative people are the lifeblood of our competition," Heintzman said. "And often, IBM offers job positions to the winners, so it's practically a golden ticket to a career."

A golden ticket that UCF, and the U.S. for that matter, will have to work long and hard for. In the past eight years, the first place position has gone to teams from Russia, China or Poland.

But for one UCF Hypersolution team member, it's not just about the job prospects.

"I know it looks great on job resumes, but it's a lot of fun," Fulwider said. "I don't know about you guys, but if I don't solve a problem every day, I think of ones that need to be done."

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