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Problems No Problem -- Ucf 2nd In Contest

February 20, 1987 | By Laura Ost of The Sentinel Staff

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The University of Central Florida earned one of its biggest academic honors Thursday -- a ranking as No. 2 in the academic world of computer programming. Thanks to several years of experience, 60 hours of practice and plenty of junk food, the four students on UCF's programming team placed second in an [international](#) contest in St. Louis, behind Stanford University and ahead of such bastions of intellect as Harvard and Johns Hopkins universities.

"There was lots of jumping and lots of screaming and lots of backslapping," Michele Spear, a UCF [graduate student](#) who served as coach, said by telephone from St. Louis.

"It was really a surprise because they submitted the answer to the last problem at the last minute and we didn't have a lot of confidence in it," she said.

The UCF [students](#) wrote programs to solve all eight problems Wednesday in the six-hour contest sponsored by the Association for Computing Machinery, the oldest and largest computer society.

The results, announced Thursday, showed that the Stanford [team](#) solved the eight problems in less time. Johns Hopkins, the only other team to solve all eight, took more time and finished third. There were 23 teams.

The UCF students, who returned to a big welcome at Orlando International Airport on Thursday night, won an Apple computer and \$800 for the [university's](#) computer department.

Not finishing first was of minor concern to the UCF team and its supporters because the university is only 18 years old. Competing institutions are decades or even centuries older.

"We had friends on the Stanford team, and they had an extremely good team and deserved to win," said [team member](#) Jim Geist, 21, a senior from Baltimore.

"It means recognition," said David Van Brackle, 24, a master's [student](#) and the team's only Orlando native. "People will take a look at our name alongside Stanford and Johns Hopkins."

Ron Dutton, the team's faculty adviser, said he got some satisfaction remembering that UCF beat Stanford last year. UCF was fourth in the 1986 contest and 17th in 1985.

Those leaner years seasoned the UCF students, who earned the right to compete in St. Louis by winning the Southeast regional contest last fall.

Van Brackle and Jim Duke, 27, met when they joined the team four years ago, and Geist and senior Nhan Tran competed last year.

"Experience plays a big role in how well you do," Duke said.

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Junk food helped too. [Team members](#) said they consumed a grocery bag full of Doritos, Twinkies and Snickers bars during the contest. And practice played a role -- six-hour sessions every Friday night for two months.

"We were getting sick of it toward the end, but I think it paid off," Duke said.

The contest was especially meaningful for Tran, 22, a Vietnamese refugee who said he barely spoke English and hated computers when he moved to the United States in 1980.

"We're really proud of them," Dutton said. "They've been under a lot of pressure because a lot of people out here have been expecting them to do well. . . . They humble me."

Orlando Sentinel

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