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UCF Captures National Computer Programming Title, Places 13th in World

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A team of three University of Central Florida students earned the title of national champions Wednesday and finished 13th in the world in an elite computer programming contest known as the “Battle of the Brains.”

In the competition at the Association of Computing Machinery’s International Collegiate Programming Contest in Rapid City, SD, the UCF trio beat teams such as the University of California at Berkeley, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Princeton, Cornell and the University of Texas at Austin.

The UCF team is made up of: Alex Coleman of Oxford, PA, a sophomore studying computer science; Timothy Buzzelli of Palm Bay, FL, a sophomore studying computer science; and Josh Linge of Jacksonville, FL, who earned a master’s degree in computer science in December.

ITMO University in St. Petersburg, Russia, won the world contest. Last year’s UCF team placed third in the nation and 28th in the world.

Last fall, more than 12,000 teams from 103 countries vied regionally for a chance to be one of only 133 teams to compete in the world contest. UCF earned its spot by winning the U.S. Southeast Regional competition in November. Other UCF teams also placed 2nd, 3rd and 4th out of 65 teams that competed in the regional contest. That contest also represented UCF’s fifth consecutive regional win.

The secret to UCF’s success is devoted practice, which is usually up to 20 hours a week, including a seven- to eight-hour practice session every Saturday, said computer science Professor Ali Orooji and faculty advisor for the team.

“Using a sports analogy, imagine how hard a football team has to work to win a national championship. This is the same thing. You have to work very hard to put yourself above the others,” he said. “It takes talented, devoted students who are willing to work hard, and coaches who volunteer so much of their time to coach these team members. It also takes the support from the university, which motivates us to keep going.” The team’s next practice is Saturday to prepare for next year’s competitions.

The contest challenges teams with complex, real-world problems under a grueling five-hour deadline. Huddled around a single computer, competitors race in a battle of logic, strategy and mental endurance. Teammates collaborate to rank the difficulty of the problems, deduce the requirements, design tests, and build software systems that solve the problems under the scrutiny of judges. The team that solves the most problems in the fewest attempts in the least cumulative time is declared the winner.

For 35 consecutive years, UCF has placed in the top three in the region, a record unmatched by any team in the nation.

“UCF is a powerhouse at the ICPC,” said contest director Jeff Donahoo, a computer science professor at Baylor University. “Virtually every year UCF has very competitive teams, and their region is extremely competitive. So just to make it to the world finals each year is amazing but to make it with the regularity that they do demonstrates the support of the university. I applaud UCF for getting behind their students and enabling them to be the best problem solvers by fostering competition.”

UCF’s remarkable record of competing at the world finals was noted at the opening ceremony Tuesday, when Orooji and UCF coach Glenn Martin received lifetime coaching awards.

Orooji was lauded for 24 world finals appearances and Martin for 20.

“I was definitely nervous going into the world finals for the first time, but I was happy that we were able to represent UCF well,” said Coleman, at age 18 the youngest competitor UCF has sent to the world finals.

Buzzelli added: “We not only exceeded our coaches’ expectations, we also exceeded those we had for ourselves.”

With world-level competition experience, the sophomores are well positioned to succeed next year, said Arup Guha, a lecturer in the UCF Department of Computer Science and a team coach.

Linge, who graduated in December, will head to Seattle to begin his job at Facebook after delaying his January start date to compete in the competition.

“This was my last year to participate in the ICPC and I’m glad I had Timothy and Alex as my teammates,” he said.

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