

Strutting Their Data, Geeks Go to Battle For Bucks and Glory

Computer Contest Challenges
Top College Programmers;
The Ivy League Flops Big

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PHOENIX — They're here for what could be called the Olympics of computing, the Super Bowl of software, the World Series of microcode. But first, the members of the Bulgarian team have to figure out how to get from the airport to their hotel.

They missed their American escort, but luckily have three bucks among them, enough to catch a city bus. Then, another dilemma: checking in. Rooms are reserved under the name of their coach—who didn't make it. But just then, the director of the computing contest wanders into the lobby and uses his own credit card to book them in.

These hurdles are nothing compared to the excitement that lies ahead: They will write software. They will party on Diet Coke. They will sign a group letter to Microsoft legend Bill Gates himself.

A Tough Bunch

The Bulgarians are here to compete against some of the world's best computing minds, for this is the 18th annual International Collegiate Programming Contest. All the competitors are tough, their mental muscles flexing with power. Their psyches are so secure they don't even mind being called geeks, perhaps because there is no translation for it in Bulgarian. As a matter of fact, the mayor of Phoenix opens the contest with a proclamation honoring all the contestants — from 35 universities as far away as Slovakia and Taiwan — as "Superior Programming Geeks."

This is beyond "Jeopardy." Contestants race to debug satellite transmissions, or create geo-positioning software that determines the location of a boat in the ocean.

"We're talking bragging rights" over the entire world, says contest director Bill Poucher, a computer-science professor at Baylor University who is called "the High Geek," sometimes to his face.

Besides the chance to win a silver trophy bowl and \$6,000 in scholarships for first place, the teams get to strut their stuff before corporate scouts, who Mr. Poucher says "lust" after top college programmers. Microsoft Corp., for instance, has snapped up at least 60 past contestants and sponsors this year's contest.

The contestants love the attention. One signs the group letter to Mr. Gates with the note: "Hire me! I'm smart and I need to eat."

Looks Don't Count

The mostly male competitors don't win high marks for appearance. Looking like a gang of skateboarders, they show up at a practice session in T-shirts, shorts and sneakers; some sport long hair in pony tails. Even the Bulgarians — Peter Dimov, Dimitre Kozaliev and Dimitre Piskylev — get in on the act, twisting their purple caps backward to fit in.

Big-name schools like Harvard, MIT and Columbia compete against the likes of Minnesota's Macalester College and New York's Yeshiva University. A trio from Canada's University of Waterloo swaggers in, pumping themselves up with an impressive power chant: "Here we are! Here we are! Here we are!"

Pregame bluster abounds, although by the standards of, say, wrestling it is somewhat tame. For example, Theo Jurriens, coach of a Dutch team from Rijks Universiteit, predicts a "top five" finish. Asked whom he fears most, Mr. Jurriens points at

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Geeks Strut Their Data Proudly At Brain Bowl for Programmers

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the Slovakian team from Comenius University in Bratislava, saying, "We have our spies there who tell us they are good." Slovakia coach Michal Winczer worries about the Bulgarians from Sofia University.

Mr. Poucher, the High Geek, warns the students the contest will be "one of the premier events in your life — or your worst nightmare." Teams have five hours to design software programs to solve eight problems, some of which alone could take professional programmers as long as six hours to figure out. There is a lot of stress. Last year, a flu-ridden Slovakian collapsed and was hospitalized.

On the big day, students mass outside the convention hall in color-coded T-shirts bearing names of their schools, nervously tossing Frisbees. Robert Kaye from Cal Poly State at San Luis Obispo, Calif., wears a snake earring and has his game hair on: a spiked red Mohawk.

"We're gonna have fun," he says. Teammate Kathleen Luce blows bubbles.

Packing Them In

The teams file into the contest room, toting reference books along with good-luck charms, the Cal Poly team's, for some reason, being stuffed elephants. This competition has not yet become a spectator sport; about 50 fans pack the bleachers. The chief judge warns about disqualification. A big no-no: Kicking out another team's power plug.

Roger Heinen, a Microsoft senior vice president, shouts: "Start up your machines! . . . Go!" He releases a string of helium balloons to the ceiling as the students grab for envelopes containing all eight problems. Over the next few hours, they work in desperate silence, sprinting for the restroom and soda as spectators fret. Each time a team successfully solves a problem, a balloon is strung up over its area. The nine judges appear serious, although at heart they are cutups. At practice they showed up wearing Groucho Marx masks.

Since each team has only one computer to work with, the three members split up duties. On the Dutch team, Marco Vervoort and Buekema Gert divide up the problems, looking for the ones they should tackle

first. Most teams opt for the easiest, a program for a crossword puzzle. Teammate Gerton Lunter, the fastest typist, mans the keyboard.

Although all the problems are written in English, the foreign students are at no disadvantage; they rely on English-language software in their home countries.

Worrying Signs

The students become so engrossed in mental gymnastics that there is precious little time for talk among themselves, leaving fans to speculate on their progress by tell-tale mannerisms. Marco "is playing with his hair; that is not a good signal," Mr. Jurriens says from the sidelines.

The Slovakia team scores first. It gets a purple balloon for solving a program to sort library books. Rival students gaze enviously across the room, turning back to their keyboards with renewed fervor.

Waterloo student Ka-Ping Yee is on his feet, dancing back and forth as his fingers flutter across the keyboard. Teammate Ian Goldberg paces furiously, fingers snapping and knuckles cracking.

The Waterloo team draws an amazed gasp from fans when it solves what judges considered the toughest problem, a triple axel of computing: a tricky navigation program to guide ships through ports.

"Ooooh, an orange!" an armchair techie marvels as the balloon for that solution is toted out to the Waterloo team.

The Final Lap

As the final minutes tick away, even fans start to sweat. "I can't take it anymore," Gregg Hamilton, the coach for the University of Central Florida, says as he runs outside. Columbia student Norm Lunde yells "What! What!" as his computer appears to malfunction. He's having a bad day. His team has no balloons.

Final tabulations reveal the winner, with six problems solved. It's Waterloo, the team with the power chant. Columbia finishes dead last. Mr. Jurriens's Dutch team finishes seventh, tied with Slovakia. Bulgaria ends up 25th. "We didn't justify our trip, I feel," Mr. Dimov laments.

As night falls, the teams meet to celebrate at a "Geekfest." There is camaraderie and laughter, and there is release of tension, as the competitors unwind over Diet Cokes.