NEWS

University computer whiz wins big at tech tourney

He beat out 1,300 others to win the TopCoder event

BY JEFF ESAU

A former John McCrae Secondary School student was the only Canadian winner in a tournament considered to be the Rose Bowl of Computer Programming.

Gary Linscott, 22, formerly of Barrhaven and now a fourth-year Computer Science student at Queen's University in Kingston, emerged from a field of 1,300 college and university students from around the world to win the top spot in the Component Development Division of the 2005 TopCoder Collegiate Challenge in Santa Clara, California on March 11.

He won $13,000 US of the $150,000 US total prize money for the international event.

Mr. Linscott's parents, Gail and John, who still reside in Barrhaven with their two younger sons, Bradley and Craig, said "we've been popping our buttons" with pride since news of Gary's victory reached them.

From the moment Gail saw her oldest son inputting programmes into the family's Commodore 64 when he was five years old, she knew he had a special love for computers and she still has that first programming book.

Speaking from Kingston, Mr. Linscott admitted he had an early interest in computers, but said it wasn't until he reached Grade 9 at Confederation High School that he really felt the technology bug bite him, particularly in game development.

Mr. Linscott says a key contributor to his success was Joe Barnabe, his guidance counsellor, football coach and mentor throughout high school.

"He always encouraged my technical endeavours, and he knew I enjoyed working with computers."

He said it was Mr. Barnabe who helped him with some important choices in Grades 9 and 10 that allowed him to go on to a highly successful university experience.

For his part, Mr. Barnabe says Gary is a "very special kid" and was not at all surprised to hear of his success.

He also credits his parents for bringing technology into the house and encouraging him to explore his interest in programming from an early age.

Mr. Linscott made excellent use of his skills in the Ottawa high-tech industry, starting work at Nortel when he was 15 years old.

During the two years he spent there on a work assignment, Mr. Linscott developed the web page for the firm's OC-48 products, which he describes as "the telecommunications backbone product Nortel sold."

According to Jim McKeown, TopCoder Inc.'s Director of Communications, there are other notable programming competitions but "we really highlight the Top Guns of coding on an individual basis. It's all about execution under incredible stress."

He said TopCoder tournaments have awarded more than $2.2 million US in prizes over three years, which he believes is the highest for all competitions worldwide.

The Collegiate TopCoder Competition began online in January with approximately 1,300 of the top competitors.

From these participants, 31 finalists were selected and flown, all expenses paid, to California for the final round.

Mr. Linscott defeated three finalists from Zhejiang University in China for top spot in the Component Development category. Winners in the Algorithm and Component Design categories hailed from the Netherlands and Romania, respectively.

Mr. McKeown said Mr. Linscott's victory was remarkable because he "really stood head and shoulders above his competition. Usually our finals are very close when it comes down to scores, but Gary won his competition with

Gary Linscott, nicknamed 'Gladius' (middle) poses with TopCoder President Rob Hughes and Grant Bassett, director, Talent Programs & Operations for TCCC title sponsor.

impressive numbers."

Even more impressive perhaps is the fact the Mr. Linscott was one of the few undergrads to compete. Most were Masters or PhD students.

Mr. Linscott's TopCoder victory is his first brush with fame in the computer programming field. However, he is a long-time member of Queen's University Association of Computing Machines (ACM) Team and joined the team at the World Finals several times.

In 2004, the Queens' team finished 12 out of 70 teams and second after the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) for North American universities. He is now a coach for the team.

The future looks bright for this whiz kid. Mr. Linscott says he has a job lined up with Microsoft after graduation. Once there, he'll be working on an "in-development project that we're not really allowed to talk about."

He said the public will see it in about two years, and thinks "people will be pretty excited about it" though he did say it had something to do with the Windows "Longhorn" operating system – the next big release from Microsoft.