Strong and Steady

Blue Ridge Brawlers win Division 1
As competitors stepped up to the plate at Operations Challenge, each shared a passion for water and a desire to take home first place in their division. Dedicated professionals, outfitted with hard hats that shined beneath the bright convention center lights, sought to make their team, sponsors, supporters, employers, and Member Association proud.

Their matching uniforms spanned the gamut from simple and sleek to creative and humorous to elaborate and sophisticated. They represented the spectrum of water sector employees. And often, teams attributed success to their differences.

“We feel it is better to have a mix of skill sets and backgrounds, so you can be strong and consistent in all five events,” said Lacy Burnette, captain of the Division 1 overall winners, the Blue Ridge Brawlers.

“It’s important to have a diverse group of participants,” said Kelsey Gedge, captain of the Division 2 winners, Elevated Ops. “We are able to play to each other’s strengths and help lift each other up where, when needed.”

In addition to supreme professionalism, this year that boost also included family ties, international relations, and new career opportunities.

— Jennifer Fulcher with Steve Harrison

Wayne Brown from the Blue Ridge Brawlers competes in the Laboratory Event. Bottom: Tommy Shaver, judge for the event, looks over Elevated Ops team members, Josh Mallorey and Matt Duncan, as they isolate valves during the Safety Event. Kieffer Photography
The Blue Ridge Brawlers earned first place overall in Division 1 through hard work, focus, dedication, and a lot of practice, said team captain Lacy Burnette. The Virginia Water Environment Association team practiced once a week since late February. They increased to as many as four practices a week to prepare for the regional competition in New Jersey and then the national Operations Challenge competition at WEFTEC® 2016.

“We knew if we could be strong and consistent and keep the penalties to a minimum that we would be able to keep up with our competition,” Burnette said. “We ramped up the focus and intensity in each practice and that really showed during all of our events this year.”

The team, which also includes Wayne Brown, Stephen Lofaro, Kevin Thomasson, and coach Randy Williams, made their dream of winning the competition a reality.

“Being first place in Division 1 at WEFTEC has been our goal since day one and we knew it would take a lot of hard work to achieve it,” Burnette said. “We really came together as a team this year and it feels good to accomplish our main goal.”

Burnette, captain of the Blue Ridge Brawlers, shows off pipetting skills during the Laboratory Event. Kieffer Photography
Motley Poo took second place overall in Division 1. Team captain Brad Yeakle attributes the success to both the team’s dedication to working together and its commitment to finding time to practice. The practice commitment is even more remarkable considering members work in different facilities in different parts of the state. Members of the Chesapeake Water Environment Association team – Yeakle, Wayne Rumbaugh, Jim Elliott, Kirk Parks, alternate Jesse McAllister, and coach Ellen Frketic – worked together to perfect routines and helped each other to become their best in all five events.

“Each [event] has a different strategy, and none of them are easy,” Yeakle said. “We have to be good in all five. If we identified issues on a specific event in practice, then we would spend more time trying to hash out the issue.”

Practice made perfect and helped Motley Poo – consisting of Kirk Parks, Wayne Rumbaugh, captain Brad Yeakle, Jim Elliott, alternate Jesse McAllister, and coach Ellen Frketic – earn second overall in Division 1. “The [Maryland Environmental Service] operations staff has to be pretty well-rounded and know all parts of the treatment process,” Frketic said. “I think the Challenge has helped to strengthen their skills.”

**TEAMWORK LEADS TO SUCCESS FOR LA WRECKING CREW**

The LA Wrecking Crew, a California Water Environment Association team, placed third in Division 1. The success stems from team members – Will Hoenig, Carlos Vasquez, Nick Janicke, Jesse Cordero, Edwin Ochoa, and coach Dale Dollins – working together, recognizing overall strengths, and working to improve weaknesses, Cordero said.

“Our team is successful because we all actively contribute new ideas, motivate each other, and consistently demonstrate enthusiastic and positive attitude while training for Operations Challenge,” Cordero said. “It takes every team member giving a 100% of their effort in order to be successful.”

Participating in the team reaches beyond WEFTEC®. “We take tremendous pride in the work we do as operators and the service we provide to the community,” Cordero said. “[Operations Challenge] gives us an opportunity to further develop our knowledge and skill set.”

The LA Wrecking Crew competes during the Godwin Maintenance Event. In addition to placing third overall in Division 1, the team also placed first in the Maintenance and the Process Control events. Kieffer Photography
Experience and focus on penalty-free runs earned Elevated Ops first-place in Division 2 of Operations Challenge. The Rocky Mountain Water Environment Association team — captain Kelsey Gedge, Matt Duncan, Lance Wenholz, Josh Mallorey, alternate Rebecca Miller, and coach Orren West — started practicing in May, dedicating 2 hours twice a week to perfecting their runs on the physical events as well as training at home and taking practice tests together to prepare for the Process Control Event, Gedge said.

“While trying to get faster at each event, we had a greater focus on running the events cleanly,” Gedge said. “We learned a lot from competing last year, and we have already had some discussions about how to tweak a few things once we start back up again next year.”

The team tried to mimic the environment at WEFTEC® 2016, practicing in the same order as their schedule on competition day. The coach even moved around the setup for practice areas, changing the placement of equipment and starting locations for the competitors.

“He tried his best to make us uncomfortable and we tried our best to not let it affect our performance,” Gedge said.
VARIETY OF SKILLS HELPS WASATCH ALL STARS

EFTEC* 2016 marked the first event where the Wasatch All Stars competed together. But this didn’t hold the team back. The Water Environment Association of Utah team placed second overall in Division 2.

Team members – captain Josh Hunsaker, Scott Brown, Lee Doxey, Dakody Gines, and coach Shawn Vockler – were chosen from four teams, each representing a different facility in Utah. The team members earned their spots on the team and their status as All Stars during Utah’s Operations Challenge competition.

Each member brought a different set of skills and had a different set of tasks for each event at the state competition. “We didn’t need to relearn too much once practicing started,” Vockler said. “Our success at the Ops Challenge this year was our team getting along so well together.”

TRA WASTE WARRIORS FOCUS ON TEAMWORK AND INDIVIDUAL DEDICATION

The TRA Waste Warriors credit their third-place win in Division 2 to preparation both individually and as a team with a focus on events and tasks that were identified as weaknesses.

The Water Environment Association of Texas (WEAT) team included captain Clifford Wood, Howard Williams, Zachary Jackson, Quintin Winters, and coach Andrew Moore.

“Everyone prepares for their roles prior to practice, reading and understanding the rules of each event, reviewing old videos, and discussing potential changes based on input from the event coordinators,” Moore said.

The team focused on preparing one of its most challenging events, Process Control. “Each person was assigned a specific area and committed to learn everything they could about that topic,” Moore said, “That person was then required to teach the other team members about that topic… The time, work, and individual dedication we placed toward improvement for this event resulted in an overall third place finish; the payoff was worth the effort.”

In Division 2, the TRA Waste Warriors team members captain Clifford Wood, Howard Williams (pictured), Zachary Jackson, Quintin Winters, and coach Andrew Moore united to earn third place both overall and in the Safety Event as well as second place in the Collection Systems Event. “This year they have definitely really, really shined,” said Dale Burrow, captain of the TRA CReWSers. “They’re a good group of guys, they deserve it.” Kieffer Photography
FATHER-SON DUO DEDICATED TO OPERATIONS CHALLENGE

The Sober family father (Gary) and son (Jeff) share a commitment to the water sector and operators. Jeff earned the 2014 Water Environment Federation (WEF; Alexandria, Va.) Young Water Professional award and Gary has been a member of WEF for 35 years. “It’s a lot of fun … Pops and I getting to work together all the time,” said Jeff Sober. Heather Wootton, Garver (Little Rock, Ar.)

While Operations Challenge is often referred to as a big extended family, Gary and Jeff Sober made that a little more literal this year. The father and son team worked on the Operations Challenge sidelines to make sure the competition ran smoothly at WEFTEC® 2016.

Gary, a Water Environment Federation (WEF; Alexandria, Va.) life member, worked as an assistant coordinator for the Laboratory Event. Jeff served as the coordinator for the Collection Systems Event.

JOINING THE OPERATIONS BROTHERHOOD

Gary first joined WEF in 1981. While working on his company’s project at the University of Texas (Austin), a professor recommended that Gary join WEF and the Water Environment Association of Texas (WEAT), so he did.

Gary has seen WEF and WEAT become “more operator friendly” and increase the opportunities for networking, he said. In addition to being an assistant coordinator at the national competition, he also coordinates the Process Control and Laboratory events for the Operations Challenge competition at the WEAT conference.

“Operators basically have a brotherhood and it’s really neat once you get into that world,” Gary said.

LEGACY OF OPERATIONS PASSED ALONG TO THE NEXT GENERATION

Gary remembers taking his son to watch Operations Challenge about 25 years ago when WEFTEC was held in Dallas.

“Growing up watching my dad in operations, it was just something I wanted to be a part of,” Jeff said.

Jeff joined WEF and WEAT in 2006 and quickly became involved in Operations Challenge at both the state and national levels. “I just thought it was a really cool program that helped advance the career and profession of operators,” Jeff said.

He started as a judge and now is a coordinator at both state and national levels.

“Judging and coordinating is a pretty good time commitment leading up to WEFTEC,” Jeff said.

Coordinators help plan the event, coordinate judges, communicate changes, assist at regional competitions, disseminate information to teams and judges, and ensure equipment has been procured and set up correctly. They spend nearly all of their time at WEFTEC focused on Operations Challenge.

OPERATIONS CHALLENGE FAMILY MAKES VOLUNTEERING WORTHWHILE

“The Operations Challenge program is just filled with a lot of really great people … it’s just a family,” Jeff said. “Being a part of that family is what keeps you doing it regardless of the commitment.”

“Most of the people you see here … have a great passion for this industry and the majority of them want to give back. They want to see the system and the people who enter it grow and get better,” Gary said.

Gary is proud of his son and enjoys sharing the passion for the profession and competition. “It’s fulfilling to look across there and see him,” Gary said.

Read the WEF Highlights article, “My Water Legacy: Like Father, Like Son,” for more about the Sobers.
From the first moment she saw Operations Challenge, Christen Wood wanted to be on a team. Her dream came true at WEFTEC® 2016 when the new Ohio Water Environment Association team, Minimal Headloss, competed.

“I have always wanted to do Ops Challenge,” Wood said. “This has always been a dream to be here.”

She approached the management team at the Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District (Cleveland) and asked to form a team. After getting approval, Wood set to recruiting members.

**New Team Showcases Range of Talents**

“Our group is very methodically put together to include as many sectors of what we do as possible,” Wood said. “I wanted to make sure the team was integrated enough that anybody could compete.”

The team includes

- Wood who has 4 years of experience in the laboratory, 4 years in operations, and 1 year in management;
- Jimmy Spencer who has more than 20 years’ experience in electronics in the military and 2 years’ experience in wastewater;
- Douglas Dietzel who has worked 4 years as a wastewater analyst and chemist in the laboratory;
- Dan Valek who has 26 years of maintenance experience with 13 years working on wastewater equipment; and
- coach Karl Ellis who has more than 35 years in wastewater operations and process management.

“We all come from very different backgrounds. We’re at different levels within our organization,” Wood said. “It’s just been really nice to have a diverse team like we do.”

Minimal Headloss team members, Jimmy Spencer, Douglas Dietzel, Christen Wood, and Dan Valek compete in the Safety Event. The Northeast Ohio Regional Sewer District (Cleveland) management supports the new team. The district's previous team competed about 25 years ago. “Participation in the team was a stepping stone into later management positions” said John Corn, training and development manager at the district. Kieffer Photography
DIVERSITY LEADS TO CROSS-TRAINING

Because of their various experiences, assigning the most technical tasks in each event to the team member with the most real-world experience in that area became simple, Wood said. Those more experienced in certain areas help train the others.

The team also worked together to redistribute tasks during each event because while at WEFTEC, Wood was 7 months pregnant. Wood was cleared by her doctor to participate but did avoid such physical tasks as going down the manhole in the Safety Event. “They’ve been incredibly supportive,” Wood said.

In addition to regular practice sessions, the team also practiced with the other Ohio teams and competed at their state competition to prepare for the national competition. Minimal Headloss used feedback from other teams and judges to improve. “Everybody is constantly getting better, I love that about my team,” Wood said.

COMPETITION TRAINING TRANSLATES TO THE JOB

The results of training already have shown benefits back at the job. Spencer calibrates a bisulfite meter every week at his facility. “His calibrations take a third less time now because he’s developed his skills in the laboratory section,” Wood said. “It’s been a great crossover training.”

Before Wood approached management, the district had been planning to form an Operations Challenge team in the future.

“I think iron sharpens iron,” said John Corn, training and development manager at the district. “When folks have an opportunity to compete against one another, that gives them a chance to enhance process across the board.”

The district consists of three large facilities. Corn hopes to use Operations Challenge as a tool to train and develop employees and increase communication and cooperation among the facilities.

“It develops a cross-pollination of best practices across our plants,” Corn said. “We really want to leverage this process as much as possible.”
Operations Challenge Team Becomes Extension of Apprenticeship Program

Since 1979, the Hampton Roads Sanitation District (HRSD; Virginia Beach, Va.) has had a 4-year apprenticeship program that combines on-the-job training with classroom instruction. But recently, Operations Challenge officially connected with the program.

Initially the connection was a coincidence. Several new employees replaced retiring Operations Challenge competitors, said Tim Scott, lead operator at HRSD and coach of Team HRSD. But with new employees starting every week, HRSD recognized an opportunity.

Making Room for the Newcomers

“We soon recognized the need to energize this new pool of employees to create the next generation of wastewater professionals,” Scott said. “The Challenge gives us a platform in which to instill the importance of what they do, and create a passion for excellence that will benefit the employee and the organization for years to come.”

HRSD now limits Operations Challenge tenure to a 4-year competitive term and encourages apprentices to participate. At WEFTEC® 2016, Team HRSD included two operator apprentices in Year 3 of the HRSD program, a maintenance apprentice in Year 1, and an interceptor technician who is a student.

The competition gives apprentices hands-on experience. “Aspects that can be taught in a classroom get applied in real-life situations,” Scott said. “The competitors get exposed to many areas of treatment and maintenance that they may not typically see at their facility. [Operations Challenge] gives them a much broader understanding and knowledge that they can draw from in the future.”

Competing Paves the Way to a Bright Future

Out of 38 previous Team HRSD competitors, 30 have been promoted within the organization, and 35 have worked for HRSD for 10 years or more, Scott said. “It is an investment in our people that has paid off by being one of the factors that has allowed us to retain talented employees for the long-term.”

Scott also believes that Operations Challenge expedites the learning process. “In just a few years of training for the competition and networking with other teams and judges, I have taken away a career’s worth of experience and knowledge,” he said.

Team HRSD not only competes at Operations Challenge competitions, the team conducts demonstrations to educate the local community and inspire a future generation to pursue clean water careers. The team’s speed on the Maintenance Event thrills those attending the Virginia Science Technology, Engineering and Applied Mathematics (STEAM) Academy Inc. (Suffolk, Va.) Summer STEAM held this summer at Old Dominion University (Norfolk, Va.). HRSD
A team of eager wastewater professionals from Argentina formed the Operations Challenge team, TNT. Every 2 years, the Interamerican Sanitary and Environmental Engineering Association (Buenos Aires, Argentina), hosts a local Operations Challenge competition and sends the winning team to compete at WEFTEC®.

This year’s team — captain Rodrigo Marcer, Ruben Cordoba, Gabriel Devita, Hugo Velez, and coach Jose Bustamante — began working together 3 weeks before the Argentina competition held May 30. The team spent 8-hour sessions every week practicing and earned their way to WEFTEC.

SPECIAL PRACTICE SESSION HELPS PREPARE TEAM

TNT repeated their training regimen before coming to New Orleans, but they were not able to acquire the same equipment used at WEFTEC, particularly the equipment used in the Safety Event, Bustamante said.

To help the Argentina team prepare, the Louisiana Water Environment Association team, the Water Dawgs, invited TNT to practice at the New Orleans Sewerage and Water Board facility.

“The Argentina team is a very nice team,” Marshall said. “It bridges the gap … to get together from across the sea, across the globe.” The Water Dawgs also treated TNT members to a lunch filled with local fare.

“‘They’re welcome anytime,’” Marshall said.

The best part about Operations Challenge is how well the team was received, the “warmth of the people,” and kindness shown by everyone involved, Bustamante said.

TNT won the 2016 Operations Challenge Spirit Award.
# OVERALL SCORES

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<th>Final Score</th>
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## LABORATORY EVENT

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## SAFETY EVENT

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**GODWIN MAINTENANCE EVENT**

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**PROCESS CONTROL EVENT**

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**COLLECTION SYSTEMS EVENT**

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**SPIRIT AWARDS**

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<td>Best Hard Hat Design</td>
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<td>Best Effort</td>
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<td>AIDIS AySA</td>
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See the winners and other competitors in a WEF Highlights Operations Challenge gallery at goo.gl/acnOm6.