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December 2003

OPERATIONS FORUM

A SPECIAL SECTION FOR OPERATORS, P. 63

Over the Top for the OLD DOMINION

Virginia teams take first and third place in 16th annual Operations Challenge

Greg Fuhs

The 2003 Operations Challenge saw 34 teams from 23 Member Associations face off and ended with a new team — comprised of some experienced competitors — taking the top prize at WEFTEC.03 in Los Angeles. The Virginia Water Environment Association's (WEA's) Fluid Dynamics, based in the city of Franklin, Va., won the Division 1 competition by a relatively comfortable margin, beating out the second place LA Wrecking Crew by more than 20 points. Last year's champions, Virginia's HRSD Bio-Force, finished third.

According to Fluid Dynamics captain Donnie Cagle, the team faced many hurdles to success but never stopped believing in themselves.



Fluid Dynamics' Donnie Cagle, Andy Rudd, Tabbe Justis, and George Talley are all smiles after winning the 2003 Operations Challenge.

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"On paper it actually shouldn't have happened," Cagle said, noting that his team had just formed in March and was separated by about 85 mi (137 km), thus limiting practice time. In addition, Cagle noted, Franklin's facilities were hit hard by Hurricane Isabel in September, so the team could only get in four practices in the month leading up to WEFTEC. He also pointed to some fierce competition. "When you look at LA Wrecking Crew and HRSD Bio-Force, the perennial favorites, they have traded the trophy back and forth over the years," Cagle said, noting that the teams come from big municipalities with more resources than the City of Franklin.

If anyone knows about the quality of those teams, it is Cagle. He worked for Hampton Roads Sanitation District (HRSD; Virginia Beach, Va.) for 15 years before moving to Franklin and was on three HRSD championship teams (in 1992, 1996, and 1998). In addition to Cagle, Fluid Dynamics included George Talley and Andy Rudd, who won last year's 2-person Operations Challenge II competition in Henderson, Nev., and Tabb Justis, who coached the 2-man team. This year's championship team was coached by Teresa Lewis.

Fight to the Finish

Statistically, Fluid Dynamics carried the day, but other teams posted very strong showings as well. Had it not been for some trouble spots in certain events, the outcome of the competition might have been different. For example, the WEA of Texas' TRA



TRA CREWSers Dave Smith, John Bennett, and Dale Burrow seal up a win in the collections event.

CREWSers (who placed fifth overall) and LA Wrecking Crew both had problems in the process control event, uncharacteristically finishing last and next-to-last in the event, respectively. However, both teams were at or near the top of the charts in the other four events.

Fluid Dynamics had its share of trouble on the collection systems event. The team posted the fastest raw time with a run of 1 minute 40 seconds, but a leak added 45 seconds to their time and pushed them back to ninth place. The TRA CREWSers won the collection systems round with a time of 1 minute 41 seconds, but Fluid Dynamics followed with a flawless performance in the ITT-Flygt pump maintenance event, beating out the nearest competitor by nearly 3 minutes. According to Cagle, "the pump maintenance event is what won the competition for us."

Top Ten Teams Overall

Division I	Member Association	Points
Fluid Dynamics	Virginia	440.80
LA Wrecking Crew	California	417.75
HRSD Bio-Force	Virginia	400.26
Caustic Solution	New England	388.32
TRA CREWSers	Texas	378.23
Commode Commandos	Rocky Mountain	321.02
Highlanders	Ontario	297.41
Crustaceans	New England	290.96
Team Austin	Texas	286.45
Sacramento Wastewater Warriors	California	285.21
Division II		
Cape Shore Workers	New Jersey	487.46
Royal Flush	Florida	470.79
Centrifugal Force	Chesapeake	446.68
River Rangers	Pacific Northwest	440.66
Team Potomac	Virginia	439.47
Nitrobacters	Ohio	438.83
Lauderdale Knights	Florida	416.25
Canadian Cross Connection	British Columbia	403.52
Jamaica Bay Anglers	New York	398.08
Northwestern Rangers	Ohio	381.21

Collections Event

Division I	Member Association	Time	Points
TRA CREWSers	Texas	101.03	100.00
Caustic Solution	New England	111.00	90.09
Crustaceans	New England	115.59	85.52
HRSD Bio-Force	Virginia	117.00	84.12
LA Wrecking Crew	California	121.10	80.05

Division II	Member Association	Time	Points
Royal Flush	Florida	117.06	100.00
Cape Shore Workers	New Jersey	124.03	98.36
Canadian Cross Connection	British Columbia	140.63	94.44
River Rangers	Pacific Northwest	143.68	93.72
Centrifugal Force	Chesapeake	153.75	91.35

Laboratory Event

Division I	Member Association	Time	Points
Fluid Dynamics	Virginia	1134.76	100.00
LA Wrecking Crew	California	1138.56	99.50
TRA CREWSers	Texas	1173.83	94.87
Caustic Solution	New England	1274.28	81.69
Commode Commandos	Rocky Mountain	1275.34	81.55

Division II	Member Association	Time	Points
Cape Shore Workers	New Jersey	1357.00	100.00
Royal Flush	Florida	1434.20	98.79
Nitrobacters	Ohio	1478.16	98.09
Canadian Cross Connection	British Columbia	1615.21	95.94
Lauderdale Knights	Florida	1680.82	94.91

Other strong showings included a consistent effort by the New England WEA's Caustic Solution (fourth place overall), a solid second place finish in the process control event by the Rocky Mountain WEA's Commode Commandos (sixth place overall), and a respectable eight place overall showing

by the New England WEA's Crustaceans, who finished third in Division II last year.

Having a typically strong team as well as the "home-field advantage," LA Wrecking Crew was considered the favorite by many, but ultimately came up a little short. Nevertheless, team captain Paul Johnson was pleased with the Crew's performance. Their "strategic error" in the process control event was a setback, Johnson noted, "so the second day we were playing catch-up." But he expressed pride in his team's ability to carry on. "They worked really hard and they didn't get down, and they continued on and we had a great showing the second day," he said.

Wesley Warren, one of HRSD Bio-Force's two coaches and a long-time former competitor, was pleased with the level of competition this year. "Over the years a lot more teams are stepping up and getting better, making it more difficult to win," Warren said. "You pretty much have to have almost a perfect day to win, which is good. You don't really want to see a team run away with it every year." Warren also praised the new champions, expressing satisfaction that the trophy went to a fellow Virginia-based team. "They deserved to win. They pretty much dominated the whole day, so they earned it," he said.

New Faces in Division II

Division II saw much excitement as a second-year team from New Jersey won the title and a new



Tabb Justis fills a volumetric flask en route to Fluid Dynamics' victory in the laboratory event.



LA Wrecking Crew's Mark McKnight and Chuck Kelcher prepare repair section during their winning safety event run.

entry from Argentina (see box, p. 73) overcame distance and language barriers to post a respectable showing in its first-ever Operations Challenge.

The New Jersey WEA's Cape Shore Workers topped the charts with a convincing victory, finishing in first or second place in four of five events and posting a strong fifth place showing in the process control event. The team faced stiff competition from the Florida WEA's Royal Flush, who also managed first or second place showings in four of five events, but ultimately the Workers outperformed the competition enough to win overall by 17 points. The Chesapeake WEA's Centrifugal Force took third place overall with strong showings in the process control, safety, and collection systems events. Per the Operations Challenge rules, the top three teams from Division II will move up to Division I next year.

ITT-Flygt Maintenance Event

Division I	Member Association	Time	Points
Fluid Dynamics	Virginia	482.88	100.00
TRA CreWSers	Texas	639.32	74.73
LA Wrecking Crew	California	660.28	71.35
HRSD Bio-Force	Virginia	704.51	64.20
Caustic Solution	New England	728.58	60.31
Division II			
Cape Shore Workers	New Jersey	612.78	100.00
Royal Flush	Florida	915.69	87.36
Nitrobacters	Ohio	932.13	86.67
Tiburones de Aguas Argentina	AIDIS Argentina	970.09	85.09
Jamaica Bay Anglers	New York	991.07	84.21

Process Control

Division I			
HRSD Bio-Force	Virginia	1758.00	100.00
Commode Commandos	Rocky Mountain	1952.00	93.68
Fluid Dynamics	Virginia	2190.00	85.92
Flush in the Pan	Ontario	2261.00	83.60
Crustaceans	New England	2282.00	82.92
Division II			
River Rangers	Pacific Northwest	1733.00	100.00
Centrifugal Force	Chesapeake	1836.00	95.16
Midland Microbes	Michigan	1846.00	94.69
Nitrobacters	Ohio	1868.00	93.66
Cape Shore Workers	New Jersey	1880.00	93.10

Safety Event

Division I			
LA Wrecking Crew	California	339.69	100.00
Fluid Dynamics	Virginia	344.22	98.59
Highlanders	Ontario	352.37	96.04
HRSD Bio-Force	Virginia	390.85	84.03
TRA CreWSers	Texas	392.13	83.63
Division II			
Royal Flush	Florida	429.09	100.00
Cape Shore Workers	New Jersey	474.44	96.00
Centrifugal Force	Chesapeake	515.36	92.39
Team Potomac	Virginia	615.16	83.60
Jamaica Bay Anglers	New York	666.97	79.03



New Jersey's Cape Shore Workers turn wrenches on their way to victory in the ITT-Flygt Maintenance Event.

"We are ecstatic. We can't wait to compete in Division I," said Nick Salfi, team captain for the Cape Shore Workers. The team, which includes Salfi, Fran

David Fitts, team captain for Royal Flush, was pleased with his team's second place finish, noting that the Florida group won the Spirit Award for

DiOrlo, Art Cowan, and Tim Fisher, has developed quickly in Division II, finishing in seventh place last year and claiming the top prize in just its second year of competing. Coached by Stash Dmytrach and John Reardon, the team is hungry for a strong performance next year, despite the inevitable underdog status it will attain as a new Division I team.

"We're not going to go [to WEFTEC 04] expecting to come in the back of the field," Salfi said. "We're going to go there with the intent that ... we're going to be in the top somewhere. Nobody's even a little bit discouraged about it."

Southern Stars

Perhaps the biggest surprise and most spirited performance of the 2003 Operations Challenge came from the Tiburones de Aguas Argentinas, a new team hailing from AIDIS Argentina. ("Tiburones" is Spanish for *sharks*.) Having beaten six other teams in September to win the first ever Operations Challenge held in Argentina, the Tiburones competed at WEFTEC for the first time and finished with a respectable 11th place showing out of 22 teams in Division II, including a solid fourth place finish in the ITT-Flygt pump maintenance event.

A decent first-time showing by any standard, the Tiburones' performance was especially impressive considering that none of the team members spoke fluent English, and three of the four had never been to the United States. According to Daniel Nolasco, founder and president of Nolasco & Associates (Ontario, Canada) and a liaison for the AIDIS team, the Tiburones had never even competed in the process control or laboratory events. "They trained out of a book on their plane" for those events, Nolasco said.

Upon landing, however, the team received a warm welcome and some pointers from some of the best in the business, meeting up with the members of LA Wrecking Crew for training and tips at the Crew's Los Angeles facility, followed by a dinner outing before the competition and a trip to Disneyland after the event. "They were very friendly, outgoing, good guys," LA Wrecking Crew team captain Paul Johnson said of the Tiburones. "We were pleasantly surprised that they did as well as they did. They had a real disadvantage with the language barrier," he added.

The Tiburones were "thrilled" to participate in the Challenge, Nolasco said. Speaking through an interpreter, Tiburones coach Pedro Rondinelli said that "the welcoming and the treatment that we have received has been extraordinary, and we feel that [the other teams] are with us all the way." Rondinelli added that "we want to come next year better prepared."

The Tiburones included Carlos Garcia, Leonardo Mancabelli, Luis Mansilla, and Hector Vaccaro.



Argentina's Tiburones isolate energy sources in the ITT-Flygt Maintenance Event.

most improved team. "We have to work even harder" to prepare for Division I, Pitts said. "It will be an awakening, but we're looking forward to it."

Benefits of Competition

Overall, the 16th annual Operations Challenge was viewed by many as a success. The intense competition drew some excited crowds, and the camaraderie between the teams was readily apparent as well.

"You can hear the different teams actually pulling for one another, even though they are competing at the same time," said John Trofatter, a competition judge and sales representative for Controlotron Corp. (Hauppauge, N.Y.), which donated the flowmeters used in the collection systems event.

From a business standpoint, Trofatter noted that Controlotron's participation has benefited the company tremendously, resulting in increased name recognition and a boost in sales. "The exposure that we have gotten from our participation in Operations Challenge is probably more than all the advertising trade shows that we have done in the last 10 years," Trofatter said.

According to Operations Challenge Committee chair John Hart, the annual event is a great opportunity for all involved, especially the contestants. "It

is an integral part of allowing and providing an avenue for the operators to come to WEFTEC," Hart said. "Other than the Operations Challenge they wouldn't really have a tool to be [at WEFTEC] to showcase their ability and expertise."

The participants seem to agree. According to Salfi, the Challenge also keeps him studying and up-to-date on various wastewater processes, "which helps when you're doing your everyday job." He noted that the competition also helps operators and other front-line personnel learn to deal with pressure. "Our supervisor here looks for people who can work under pressure," Salfi said.

For his part, Cagle looks forward to seeing the many people he has met over the years through the Challenge at WEFTEC. He also points to the benefits of competing. "There are a lot of things that you face in the field on a day-to-day basis that require quick thinking, and what better way to hone that skill than a competition where you're judged for time and accuracy and held accountable for it?" Cagle asked. "I think it teaches you to think on your feet in a way that I'm not sure any other training could do."

Greg Fuhs is editor of Operations Forum at the Water Environment Federation (Alexandria, Va.).

Acknowledgements

The Water Environment Federation would like to thank the following companies for their contributions to Operations Challenge 2003:

Gold Level

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Operations Challenge Awards Reception video presented by Operations Management International Inc. (Englewood, Colo.).

The trophies for each event were contributed by the following individuals:

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Rob Villee
Plainfield Area Regional Sewerage Authority
Middlesex, N.J.

Laboratory

Cathy Henderson
Trinity River Authority
Dallas, Texas

ITT-Flygt Maintenance Event

Bob Domkowski
ITT-Flygt
Trumbull, Conn.

Process Control

Bill Shuck
LA County Sanitation Districts
Carson, Calif.

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Wesley Warren
Hampton Roads Sanitation District
Chesapeake, Va.