Top minds compete in National Science Olympiad at UCF

May 16, 2014 | By Lauren Roth, Orlando Sentinel

The glider shot up into the lobby of the UCF Arena, banked right and started a slow, looping swirl to the floor.

The pilot, Edward Danilyuk of Mat-Su Career & Tech High in Wasilla, Alaska, looked up at his creation with concern, despite the seemingly graceful flight. Edward and his partner Tyler Olson, 18, were preparing for the Elastic Launch Glider competition Friday at the National Science Olympiad.

"This thing does a circle, then likes to go straight. I don't know why," said Edward, 17. Olson suggested shaving a bit off the balsa wood tail.

More than 7,000 students from all 50 states are competing in several dozen events through today at the University of Central Florida.

The 120 teams at the Olympiad have already proven themselves to be among the best in their states.

All competitors participate in several events. They include written tests on subjects such as anatomy, lab experiments and design events, including one for which 14-year-old Morgan Tolley built a working thumb piano.

Morgan, of Frontier Middle School in Moses Lake, Washington, said her favorite part of the Olympiad is...
meeting kids with similar interests from all over the country. "When we're sitting in school doing our projects, it's neat to think there's someone somewhere else doing the same thing," said Morgan's teammate, Kaitlyn Logue, 13.

Four schools are representing Florida at the competition: Orlando Science Middle School, Boca Raton Community High School and the Archimedean Middle and Upper Conservatory Schools in Miami.

UCF, which also hosted the national tournament two years ago, hopes to attract some high-flying future students through the event. Up to 47 participants who earn a gold ranking in the high school division will earn a scholarship of as much as $30,000.

UCF officials cited the example of Winter Park native Aaron Wertz as a reason for hosting the competition. Wertz, a University of Florida senior who participated in Science Olympiad in middle and high school, credits the competition with igniting a passion for science and engineering.

"My fondest memory of Science Olympiad was building and launching water rockets made of 2-liter soda bottles," he said. "Funny to think 10 years ago I was launching homemade water rockets and now I'll be designing real ones."

Back at the arena, the Wasilla teens said they get the biggest adrenaline rush from the competition itself. "We're at Nationals – you're going against some of the best minds in the U.S.," said Olson, who is competing in his sixth national tournament and came in second last year in a building event.

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"It's a good feeling," Edward agreed.

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