Team Padawan

BY KATHY HARVATT

ALTHOUGH UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND UNIVERSITY College (UMUC) doesn’t field a football or basketball team, one group on campus is nonetheless making a name for itself in national and international competition.

Meet the Cyber Padawans, a team of competitive cybersecurity experts. Their team name—a nod to the Jedi apprentices from the movie *Star Wars*—isn’t the only thing that has garnered attention.

In fact, Matt Matchen and five of his fellow Padawans—students John Arneson and Armando Quintananieves, alumnus Chris Kuehl, and faculty members Jeff Tjiputra and Rob Murphy—recently topped some 80 university and corporate teams to take first place in the North American CyberLympics finals. Representing North America at the Global CyberLympics in Miami, the team stepped up to the challenge, finishing second overall.

Soon after, the Padawans took first- and second-place honors in the four-year college category at the Maryland Digital Forensics Investigation Challenge. They went on to place third out of 18 U.S. undergraduate teams—and fourth out of 27 worldwide competitors—in the Department of Defense Cyber Crime Center’s year-long Digital Forensics Challenge (or DC3).

These achievements are made more significant by the fact that UMUC is still relatively new to the world of cybersecurity competition. It all began about two years ago when Tjiputra—academic director of cybersecurity and computer networks and security for UMUC’s Undergraduate School—began looking for ways to help his students apply the theories and concepts they were learning in class.

“Having competed myself as an undergraduate, I know that these challenges are a great learning tool and an incentive to study even harder,” said Tjiputra. “In my experience, those who get involved in competitions tend to go on to bigger and better things, because it makes the field all the more exciting.”

To recruit players, Tjiputra created a special online class and invited all interested comers. At first, only 10 students signed up; just two years later, the class has grown to include 75 students who, Tjiputra said, are quickly moving into the “best of the best” category.

For Arneson, the opportunity to compete has given him a tremendous advantage in his cybersecurity bachelor’s degree program. “I chose this major because I’ve always wanted to work in intelligence,” he said. “But when I got to UMUC after two years of community college, I had never even taken a computer class. I caught up fast, though, when I joined the team, because you learn a lot just preparing for competitions. I also love the major adrenaline rush you get when you’re powering through a challenge.”

During some of the more grueling competitions, adrenaline was all that kept the team going. “At the [Global] CyberLympics challenge, we were on our computers for six hours straight, working in tight quarters and taking restroom breaks one at a time,” said Quintananieves. “So once the rush of playing wore off, all that any of us wanted to do was eat and sleep.”

Like any good team, the Padawans have developed a strong rapport, along with a
number of war stories. Matchen laughed as he recalled the team’s rather unconventional practice routine for the CyberLympics final rounds in Miami.

“We decided to go down a week early to get in some much-needed practice time,” said Matchen. “Problem was, the only Wi-Fi at our motel was in the lobby. Luckily, there was a Starbucks right next door where we could set up, using my cell phone as a router for connecting into the practice program. Looking back, I guess we owe the folks who worked there a pretty big thanks.”

While the cyber competition field is still, for the most part, male-dominated, Tjiputra is also happy to see a growing number of women signing on to the team, including Jean Costello, one of four Padawans to take first place in the Maryland DFI challenge.

“I wanted to work with really bright people who have a passion for cybersecurity like me—and I wanted to have some fun while doing it,” said Costello, who is pursuing a bachelor’s degree in cybersecurity. “I decided [the Cyber Padawans] are the best of the best—and I wanted to get to know those people.”

Meanwhile, Tjiputra looks forward to creating a UMUC-sponsored competition in the future that will help to raise even greater awareness around the university’s cybersecurity programs.

“We’ve come a long way in a fairly short time, competing against some of the brightest minds in the world,” said Tjiputra. “And the momentum just keeps building.”

UMUC extends special thanks to Cyber Padawan Matt Matchen and his employer, Braxton-Grant Technologies Inc. (BGTech), for providing a unique practice opportunity. Using his company’s IT resources, Matchen set up a private cloud with some 20 virtual machines, allowing the Padawans to log in remotely and practice together for competitions. BGTech is a small, woman-owned systems integration consulting firm that provides cybersecurity solutions to clients in government, healthcare, education, and finance.