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EPFL wins the International Physicists' Tournament



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10.04.18 - On Saturday, a team of students from EPFL won the 2018 International Physicists' Tournament in Moscow, beating the French and Brazilian teams in the final.

Fifteen teams from around the world gathered for a week at the Moscow Institute of Physics and Technology for the 10th annual International Physicists' Tournament.

At the final on Saturday, EPFL edged out its rivals to win the tournament. EPFL's team was selected to represent Switzerland at a national competition held on campus last December. A Swiss team also won the competition in 2013.

This year's scores were very close: Switzerland (47.2 points) narrowly beat France (46.4 points), represented by the Ecole Polytechnique in Paris, and Brazil (39.8 points), represented by the Federal University of ABC (UFABC).

Playing the role of opponent and reviewer too

For this tournament, the teams receive a series of physics problems several months prior to the competition. This year's challenges included: estimating the temperature of a liquid from the sound it makes when poured; determining the statistical distribution of sparks created by an angle grinder; and making a speaker without any moving parts. At EPFL, the third-year physics curriculum for Bachelor's students includes time to prepare for the tournament.

The teams have to come up with solutions, which they present at the competition alongside those of the rival teams. The teams are evaluated by an international panel of professional physicists on the basis of their solutions and their critique of their rivals' work.

Unexpected victory

"A week ago, I would absolutely not have banked on winning," says Alberto Rolandi, EPFL's team captain. "We ran out of time, and so at the start of the tournament we were only ready to present seven of the 17 problems. But we stuck with it and pulled it off."

After a week of intense work, the six members of the Swiss team and the three people who accompanied them returned to Switzerland exhausted but thrilled. They learned a lot from the experience, including the fact that the opponents and jury do not fully appreciate the quality of a team's background research if it's not well presented. "The work done by the Ukrainian team, for example, was clearly a cut above that of the other teams, but their presentations were nowhere near the level required by the tournament," adds Rolandi, who's in the third year of his Bachelor's degree. "It's no different when it comes to publishing articles!"

Next year, Rolandi says he's ready to step aside and let other physics students compete. "It's best to quit while you're ahead. But I would like to join the international executive committee so that I can help organize future tournaments."

Rolandi adds: "I'd really like to thank our three coaches and my teammates for their great work throughout the semester and at the tournament. I'm also grateful to the technical staff in the physics labs for their support in both theoretical and practical matters."

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